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Painted Discourses: Lived Experience in the Nasca Visual System

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PAINTED DISCOURSES: LIVED EXPERIENCE IN THE
NASCA VISUAL SYSTEM

by

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This paper looks at the ancient Peruvian culture of the Nasca and discusses the ceramic iconography in terms of lived experience. By understanding the images as “discourse,” a term from the philosopher Michel Foucault, scholars can begin to contextualize the iconography not simply as bearers of esoteric meaning, but sociopolitical statements regarding how the ancient peoples experienced their world.
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Introduction

Over one thousand years ago in southern Perú, the ancient Nasca culture flourished in highly inhospitable conditions, creating some of the world’s most finely crafted ancient ceramics and recognizable visual styles (figure 1). Known for the gigantic desert geoglyphs, some morphologically similar to animals, these people were descendants of an earlier culture called Paracas, whose gift of an intricate visual system left an enduring legacy for almost a millennium on the Nasca.¹ Their remains were discovered by Peruvian archaeologists in the early twentieth century, and have led to numerous excavations and discoveries that have changed the way scholars understand cultural formations in particularly rugged climates.²

This thesis will be a critical review of the scholarly literature concerning the ancient Nasca and their visual system, or iconography, in an attempt to construct an emic view. This emic view is essential in understanding how the Nasca themselves interacted with and constituted their symbolic visual system. Archaeologists, until recently, have only discussed the Nasca in terms of other cultures, mainly the highland Inca. Now, interesting new insights into the Nasca’s social formations (to be discussed later) have finally propelled scholars to a more accurate understanding of the socio-politics of the time. Without access to the Nasca’s language, these new understandings of how the Nasca structured their society can help in reconstructing the Nasca’s cosmology. It is through their art, and specifically the polychrome, ritual, feasting vessels, that their social world can be reconstructed. By treating the images on the polychrome ceramics as a language of sorts, and understanding that the language is highly enmeshed within their

¹ Proulx, 2006, 2.
² Ibid., 3; 50; 86.
cultural institutions, the pottery emerges as a window into the Nasca’s reality-of-the-time, not just simply a display of motifs with ritual and esoteric natures.

An “emic view” consists of understanding the symbolic systems within the cosmology of the Nasca. I follow Geertz’s conception of symbolic patterns in societies as: patterns of meanings embodied in symbols that are historically transmitted by means of which humans can create, perpetuate, and reinterpret their systems of knowledge and social institutions.\(^3\) This is also how a cosmology operates within a culture, and produces a social reality that is shared and perceived as being a signifier of “Nasca.” In other words, sharing in this social reality, world view, emic view, etc., produces cultural meaning and social belonging, and as such, is intimately tied to the cultural identity in general, but also to where an individual is socially ranked in their society.

Since the Nasca lack written language, it is imperative that to understand what the Nasca themselves constituted within their social reality, their visual systems cannot continue to be interpreted as esoteric motifs known only by religious experts, or simply mirrors of a nature-worshipping society. The ceramic vessels, and their painted surfaces, were fully integrated within the social structures and processes of the Nasca and were integral in maintaining social cohesion.

Instead of understanding the Nasca motifs on their polychrome vessels as “iconography” I believe the images should be read as “discourse,” operatively termed by Michel Foucault when he attempted to discover systems of thought within Western European history regarding the penal system.\(^4\) Discourse, in its most essential form, is

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knowledge that is both created by a subject (a person, a government, etc.) and a culture, which leads to the subject becoming a cultural being. This cultural being shares in a system of knowledge which is generally agreed upon (e.g. eating/dressing customs) by a larger group, and is passed on through cultural practice. There are multiple discourses working within societies, both materially and symbolically, to ensure that the culture (and its elite) will live on, though it can be liable to change through cultural and subjective intrusion. Invasion and colonization are good examples of material processes of cultural intrusion into discursive systems, while the spread of religion could be considered an example of a symbolic process of discursive intrusion.

By changing how people materially and symbolically interact with the world produces a different and ultimately more pliant cultural and social being, with the new hegemonic cultural and subjective discourses now framing their reality. Nasca iconography, I argue, is a visual representation of their social discourses, specifically those related to agricultural fertility/production and warfare. Their understanding of natural phenomena has produced a unique cosmological discourse on how crops can be successfully grown by the taking of trophy heads in ritual warfare, and is indeed visually represented through the motifs found on the polychromes.

Discourses are also similar to Geertz’s cultural systems, but are multiple and may operate proactively, retroactively, or neutrally with each other. Proactive operations are when different paradigms of culture interact and take on each other’s customs. An example is American cuisine, in which multiple immigrant waves produced mixed eating customs, especially in the Northeast. A retroactive example could be the explicit archaization of cultural habits/customs/values as a form of political resistance (early
American architecture utilizing Roman Republican buildings – not Imperial – to visually and explicitly break from the English monarchy). Discourse is the language of power, something that legal systems of societies rely on to maintain a certain ideological stability and control. Discourses can become dominant over others, and it is these dominant discourses that are then formulated into the cosmologies of a culture, binding members of a culture together into a shared social reality.

My project is to place the Nasca within their unique geographic and social contexts, work through the existing literature, to discover methodological failures, and then propose a new reading of the iconography as discourse. These images are not simply motifs that are possibly connected to others through interesting morphological and thematic similarities, but images of how the Nasca operated in their world and symbolically connected it together. The first chapter is an exploration of the geographic and social contexts, as well as the scholarly conception of the Nasca through time. This will set the stage for understanding the Nasca as a unique cultural system that is in a larger Andean network of social relations. The second chapter, more or less, diachronically maps the scholarly on Nasca’s iconography. It is split into three sections based on larger themes of how scholars contextualized the Nasca. The last chapter is an understanding of a particular motif, dubbed “Anthropomorphic Mythical Being” (or

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5 Ibid., 250.
6 The term “social” refers to systems or relations which are generalized and non-specific to a culture. For example, kinship relations (like a moiety) is a social system, or process, whereas a “cultural” system would refer to the specific culture’s symbolic connotations of a moiety. The social system of moiety relations can also be a cultural system when it takes on specific symbolic meanings ascribed to it. For the Inca, the moiety was split into male/female, sun/moon dichotomies. They moiety system itself is the social system, whereas the different connotations to the heavens and gender is the cultural system the Inca created themselves. This paper views the “social” as the objective framework of language used to denote pan-human relations (like marriage), and the “cultural” as whatever cultural meanings are operating in tandem with the social system.
“AMB”), as an example of how to understand the iconography in broader terms, as an image of the Nasca’s social and cultural reality.

The AMB is constitutive of the Nasca’s social reality for a number of reasons. The motif is shown with costume elements archaeologically known to be associated with individuals of high status. Clearly, this “mythical” creature had a social status of some sort, and was therefore conceived of as having an agency similar, if not higher, than that of humans. This being is also incredibly ubiquitous on the polychrome pottery that carries all Nasca iconography. This fact has led to some believing it may have been the principal deity, but I believe the motif represents actual ritual performers who probably utilized the very vessels they are painted on for feasting ceremonies. The changing seasons are also represented within the images, as different life stages of frogs, and the seasonal migrations of certain bird species all point to the Nasca’s art as a form of recording their natural and cultural worlds.

I hope to instill within the reader a new way of conceiving and interpreting the motifs of the ancient Nasca by operating under the idea of the images as discourse, and the Nasca culture as both enmeshed within symbolic constructs of its own history as well as the surrounding cultural landscape of the Andes. Archaeologists are now armed with new insights into the nature of site-interaction between larger and smaller sites and mortuary practices, and continue to make new material discoveries in Perú’s southern desert. Adding new ideas of images as carriers of systems of knowledge that are created by individuals, organizations, and cultures, can greatly add to the analysis of the ancient Nasca.
Chapter 1: Understanding the Nasca’s Landscape as Context

This chapter is the beginning step in attempting to understand the ancient Nasca’s visual system, or iconography, as a product of cultural institutions and interactions with the surrounding environment. Understanding the unique context of the Nasca will also help in elucidating what is particular to the culture and its visuality. The environment in which the Nasca civilization developed certainly played a part in the creation of its visual style, and is incredibly important to understand. The natural world was the major aesthetic inspiration for their visual system, as the Nasca were primarily farmers, fishers, and foragers living in small communities that were politically independent.\(^7\)

Because of the lack of written language, the Nasca’s ideology has remained obscure, and has been pieced together by archaeologists working with the few remains left behind by the desert society. Ethnography of the Inca, and other highland Andean societies, has been extensively applied to the analysis of Perú’s south coast remains because of this lack of documentation, and, I believe, to the detriment of Nasca studies in general. Instead of attempting a reconstruction from the ground-up, so to speak, of their cosmology, many scholars grafted cosmic conceptions documented in the highlands of the Andes onto the Nasca’s visual and mortuary practices. It was not until later in the twentieth century that the iconography began to be seen as a possible reflection of social occurrences.\(^8\)

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This chapter is split into two broad parts. The first deals with Andean natural and social landscapes, or kinship structures. I will describe the natural world the Nasca inhabited, as well as the Andes at large, to gain an understanding as to how the culture was both a part of, but also uniquely singular from, its larger geographic context. I will then describe the paradigmatic Andean kinship structure called an ayllu in terms of its possible relation to ancient Nasca society. This term is a Quechua term, the language which the ancient Inca spoke and one of the few languages the Spanish chroniclers documented, as well as surviving into the present day. It remains as the benchmark for Andean studies, and is continuously applied to ancient cultural institutions and practices. I will also speculate how such a model may be oversimplifying, or even entirely missing, how Nasca society may have constructed itself in terms of kin-relations.

The second part of this chapter is concerned with the scholarship and worldview of the ancient Nasca society through time. Reconstructing the trajectory Nasca studies has moved will help in elucidating why it has taken so long for an emic based view of the culture to be developed. In the beginning, the Nasca were unfortunately considered to be vestiges of Mesoamerican cultures whose visual culture degenerated into simple and esoteric forms. The “feathered serpent” was used to describe Nasca motifs in the early literature, and is just one example of how early scholars viewed the Nasca as recipients of culture through diffusion, rather than as their own cultural producers.

Additionally, it has only been recently discovered that the political and ritual complexity of a specific ceremonial Nasca site, Cahuachi, has been grossly

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9 For example, the term huaca has been appropriated by archaeologists and scholars at large to identify sacred ancient places and objects that existed before the Inca. This is also a Quechua word the Inca used to describe their sacred objects and places, and was most likely not the term used by the more ancient cultures.
underestimated, which then subsequently changes the nature of interpretation of the polychrome vessels and their relation to the ancient political economy in the region. If these vessels had a centralized production process, something never considered before 2005, then the socio-politics of the Nasca presented thus far in the scholarly literature is a false picture.\footnote{This will be presented in full later in the chapter.} Before Kevin Vaughn, et. al.’s analysis of the ceramics, the political structure that archaeologists proposed had reduced the Nasca to possessing chiefdom-level social relations that practiced irrigated agriculture on a semi-large scale. Now, it is clear that there was far more political complexity in the ancient region with the ritual feasting vessels playing an integral part in the process of creating discursive systems of power.

**Andean Natural and Social Landscapes**

The Andes form an incredibly diverse region in western South America that hosts a veritable spectrum of environments and peoples (see figure 1). Beginning with the western shore, the coast is a desert hugging the Pacific which seasonally brings abundant marine resources that have been, and still are, collected as a primary food source.\footnote{Donald Proulx, *A Sourcebook of Nasca Ceramic Iconography*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006, 17.} Moving east, the desert floor slopes upward, the landscape forming more pronounced river valleys as the elevation increases. Irrigation projects in and along these valleys led to the cultivation of diverse agricultural products, and particularly for the Nasca, avocado, fruit, peppers, tubers, maize, and cotton.\footnote{Vaughn 2009, 35.} It is in these river valleys,
approximately 10 – 100 kilometers from the coast, that the Nasca developed their culture. This could be considered their cultural heartland, yet I would like to point out that Nasca polychromes have been found several hundred kilometers from the region and were most likely a prestige good for southern desert societies.\(^\text{13}\) Additionally, while the coast was extensively utilized as a source of food, fishing villages remained small, and were mainly used only for economic, logistical operations. Actual habitation sites of the Nasca were not located on the coast, as the winds would likely have made domestic life unbearable.\(^\text{14}\)

Moving upwards into the Andes past the Nasca settlement area, the environment becomes cooler, with frosts at night and windy day conditions. The land is used for hardier types of crops such as some particular species of tuber, quinoa, and hardier grains and edible roots.\(^\text{15}\) From here, the elevations can become dangerously steep, and the atmosphere is very thin, dry, and cold.\(^\text{16}\) It is in this clime that people herd camelids for the wool and meat, and it is from here the Nasca traders would have travelled to procure their llama products.\(^\text{17}\) Life is very different for cultures that live at the higher elevations as it tends to be pastoral, non-agricultural, and non-settled. These particular social systems of living – discourses – are very different from the southern coastal desert: settled, agricultural and socio-politically more complex.

The social landscape of the Andes is often formulated on the concept of an *ayllu*. The *ayllu* was a concept of familial relations the Inca and their ancestors\(^\text{18}\) used and related to a moiety type of kinship system. A community is essentially bifurcated in two

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 35.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 35.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 20.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 21.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 21 – 22.  
\(^{18}\) This is still seen widely today in many places of the Andes.
large groups, with one invariably gaining a hierarchical social status over the other.\(^\text{19}\)

People from one half of the *ayllu* would only marry those from the opposite to ensure genetic tampering was minimal.\(^\text{20}\) The two halves could also be conceptualized in terms of different regions or communities. One community could be considered a sister/brother/counterpart to another, and though there would most likely be some genetic inter-marriage, the point is more of a symbolic connection.\(^\text{21}\) An *ayllu* could thus be formulated as a framework for a spectrum of social institutions at the different scales of the family, community, and inter-community.

While these practices have been documented among contemporary peoples of the Andean highlands, they nonetheless require a critical eye in regard to the Nasca. What I collectively refer to as “highland ethnography” is the dominant paradigm anthropologists apply to ancient Peruvian cultures. It is also, I believe, becoming somewhat detrimental to current understandings of such cultures because it may be oversimplifying the true social relations. I cannot offer my own complete reconstruction that would be entirely separate from the *ayllu* system. The situation, nevertheless, reveals a necessity to understand such cultures in their own right, not as benchmarks of later highland social norms.

**Anthropological Understandings of the Nasca Through Time – Early Views on the Nasca’s Politics**

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 22.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 23.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 24.
The question to be asked now is, how exactly were the Nasca socio-politically organized? It is often answered when discussing the relation of the Nasca to the large ceremonial site of Cahuachi (figures 1 and 2). Archaeologists initially believed that the site controlled a strong state territory in the south of Perú from around 1 to 500 CE. The reasons for this conclusion were derived from the belief that the large monumental mounds at the ceremonial center were domestic habitation sites. Additionally, the polychrome pottery and its uniform style, at least in the earlier Nasca phases, also led to the belief that they may have been produced in one location and then distributed throughout the Nasca region. This is important as this model, though abandoned by Strong and others later, seems to be adopted in light of the new chemical analyses.

Proulx, in 1968, proposed the strong state model based on additional pottery correlations found in different river valleys. The Ica Valley, the northernmost river valley archaeologically discerned to be part of the Nasca cultural geography, displayed pottery types from the earlier phases based on stylistic analysis. Interestingly, the pottery found matched with types discovered in the center of the Nasca cultural heartland, quite far from the Ica Valley. At other peripheral sites such as Tambo Viejo, a site north of the Ica Valley, the sudden appearance in the stratigraphic record of this early pottery

23 Ibid., 3 – 5.
24 Ibid., 5.
26 Ibid., 17.
27 Ibid., 18.
also pointed to a possible sudden takeover, given that the shift between pottery types was sudden and complete, in under a generation.\textsuperscript{28}

**Middle-Twentieth Century Views on the Nasca’s Politics**

The middle of the twentieth century saw Nasca studies becoming increasingly concerned with understanding the nature of Cahuachi and its ritual/political influence on the rest of ancient Nasca culture. Helaine Silverman (from 1980-82 with other intermittent digs)) began archaeological work at the large mounds and other areas of notable areas at the site’s core to understand what activities may have been conducted.\textsuperscript{29} She determined that the site was an “empty” ritual center, devoid of a permanent population and instead, served a migratory and cyclic population of pilgrims from the surrounding regions.\textsuperscript{30} Her survey was pivotal in understanding the unequivocally ritual nature of Cahuachi. Pottery recovered at the site led to an amazing statistic: around 70% was not utilitarian wares, but the fine polychromes; utilitarian wares accounted for less than 30%, and in some areas, less than 5%.\textsuperscript{31} The Nasca were clearly feasting on large scales at the ceremonial center that is encountered nowhere else archaeologically in the Nasca region. The ritual nature of the site probably lent to the utilization of mainly the fine ceramics, as different elites would have had to compete for prestige. No doubt the polychrome vessels played a major part in the social competition.

\textsuperscript{29} Helaine Silverman, *Cahuachi in the Ancient Nasca World*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993, 3.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 80, 95.
As other areas of Cahuachi were uncovered by Silverman, further details emerged that revealed the ritual-only status of the site. Numerous grave lots with Nasca mortuary bundles were found in the site’s main ceremonial core. The city could not have functioned logistically if it had to contend with numerous graveyards scattered throughout its spaces, so Silverman’s socio-political reconstruction of the site seemed to work. Other areas that were normally reserved for domestic spaces were never identified by Silverman’s archaeological work, and this, coupled with the fact that the site is in an incredibly poor state of preservation, convinced her that the site was neither politically “strong” nor exerted any formal control. It essentially served as a temporary meeting place for ritual experts and attendant pilgrimage populations.

Giuseppe Orefici, working at the same time as Silverman, held similar views regarding Cahuachi’s socio-political role in the ancient Nasca civilization. After almost twenty years of archaeological work, he failed to uncover definitive proof of permanent habitation. His work was specifically aimed at locating types of areas and refuse which may indicate projects and practices of an annual population. He looked at several of the monumental mounds, including ones previously thought to be natural promontories, and discovered no organic materials that correlate to human refuse. What organic materials were found corresponded to fibrous elements used for netting and textiles in mortuary contexts, and probably were not domestic waste. Thus, work at Cahuachi in the late twentieth century was beginning to cast doubt on any Nasca central political project occurring at the site.

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32 Ibid., 78.
33 See in Proulx, 2006, 7.
36 Ibid., 21.
The last blow to the strong state theory came from further study of the peripheral sites north of the Ica Valley. Valdez looked again at the contexts in which the pottery remains were found in relation to other indicators, such as domestic refuse mounds. These indicators signaled to Valdez that the people living north of the Nasca heartland, who were utilizing Nasca ritual polychrome vessels, indeed had been there long before the intrusion of the Nasca ceramics in the stratigraphic sequence. If there had been an actual military takeover, or something similarly hegemonic, the sequence would reveal other Nasca cultural artifacts concerning mortuary practices, as well as skeletal deformations consistent with defensive wounds and attacks; no such artifacts nor skeletal remains could be identified.

Twenty-first Century Views of the Nasca’s Politics

With the closing of the twentieth century, the Nasca’s politics seemed too teleological towards egalitarianism, as no social elite could be properly identified due to massive looting and the arid environment. The culture’s seeming explicit lack of any distinct elite personages in archaeological contexts furthered this teleology along. It was the beginning of the twenty-first century when archaeologists began to find more evidence that there indeed was a social strata higher than the larger population, who

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37 Lidio Valdez Cárdenas, "The Nasca and Acarí: Cultural Interaction on the Peruvian South Coast during the First Four Centuries A.D. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Archaeology, University of Calgary.
38 Ibid., 4.
39 Ibid., 5 – 6.
utilized fine polychrome ceramics and gold mouth masks in their mortuary customs.\textsuperscript{40}

Such mortuary customs are pivotal in understanding the Nasca’s visual system in relation to their own social practices. For example, Isla Cuadrado, in his opening of a tomb at a Nasca site, revealed that they had a stratified segment of society that distinguished themselves through the adornment of gold repoussé objects.\textsuperscript{41} Additionally, the tomb contained forty six polychrome vessels of high quality that further indicate the individual’s elite status.\textsuperscript{42}

With un-looted tombs finally yielding evidence of a more stratified society, additional archaeological work was undertaken in the early 2000s in more scientifically rigorous ways. A team led by Kevin Vaughn in 2004 (their findings published formally in 2005) undertook an instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA) on pottery remains from the Nasca region in two different phases.\textsuperscript{43} The first phase corresponds to the Nasca culture proper, specifically encompassing the time period from 1 to 450 CE. The second phase relates to the later Tiza culture that existed from approximately 1000 to 1476 CE just north of the Nasca. What the INAA did was allow researchers to chemically match the clay that was used in creating the pottery to known clay beds in the Nasca region. Incredibly, they found that, at the outset, 81% of the Nasca clay came from a single source: a clay bed just outside the ceremonial core of Cahuachi.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 685.
This evidence now calls into question the views held by the late twentieth century
scholars concerning the Nasca’s politics. If their society was indeed chiefdom-level, with
no central power projects underway, then why is it that a clear majority of the ritual
polychromes all originate from a single source, one which happens to be the largest site
in the entire Nasca heartland and beyond? Clearly, there were more dynamic social
relations than previously thought, though I would like to take the time to point out how
the earliest researchers were also incorrect in their strong state model. Elites were not
necessarily conquering the Nasca region, and creating a single discourse of power
centered at Cahuachi. Rather, over time, the ceramics produced at the ceremonial site
gained preeminent status among elite individuals in peripheral sites, and created a project
of power that was gradual, not sudden, and was most likely not intentionally hegemonic
at the outset. At its apogee, Cahuachi was enjoying a status that was verging on state-
level society (versus the chiefdom-level politics found in the peripheral sites) before its
collapse circa 400 – 500 CE.45 In this regard, it may be more prudent to consider
Cahuachi in light of a stronger- state, rather than strong-state, model.

While Cahuachi is undoubtedly more prevalent now in discussions of politics than
before, how actively hegemonic it was is still highly debatable. It is probable that,
because of the lack of large domestic refuse deposits, the elites of Cahuachi were
utilizing a ritual form of power, and not one based on military prowess and expansion.
This would also account for the seeming lack of areas that should be present for domestic
habitation, such as places for the production of textiles, ceramics, etc. of a utilitarian
nature. If the resident population was a small group of ritual specialists with attendants,

45 Ibid., 685.
and were most likely sustained by the cyclic pilgrimages, then such a lack of production centers at the site would not be out of the ordinary.

In another chemical study on Nasca ceramics, Vaughn, et. al. furthered the evidence that, from the period of Cahuachi’s rise and prominence (1 to 400 CE), most of the polychrome ceramics were created at the one clay source at the ceremonial center.\textsuperscript{46} The collection under scrutiny was the Kroeber Collection, collected in the early twentieth century by the Berkeley archaeologist Alfred Kroeber and housed at the University of California, Berkeley. This extensive collection covers the entire Nasca timeline in terms of its ceramic corpus, and helped in identify the time period in which ceramic production in the ancient region was more centralized. Interestingly, after Cahuachi’s fall from power (circa 400 – 450 CE), centralized production of the polychromes at the ritual center tapers off drastically, and becomes fully localized during the Proliferous Phase, circa 500 CE.\textsuperscript{47}

Conclusion

The Nasca civilization is both a complex amalgamation of Andean social practices and visual styles, as well as a singular invention. Their environment is one of the driest of Perú, yet their location by the sea, as well as being close to highland sources, led to a dynamic cross-cultural economy, and subsequently a complex visual system.

While definitively not a highland culture, it nonetheless had contacts with such groups


\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 3566.
and their attendant customs to produce an ancient society that had multiple sources of visual inspiration. Archaeologists, grappling with the arid conditions, constant grave robbing, as well as their own biases, have finally come to a more emic-based understanding through scientific inquiry of the desert culture’s remains. It is this dynamism, in the landscape as well as the literature, which can lead to further insights into the visual system of the fine polychrome vessels, and shed light on the images’ ability to provide a true window into their lived, social reality.
Chapter 2: The Study of Nasca Ceramic Iconography through Time

This chapter is an exploration of the most influential and widely cited Nasca iconographic studies. It is here that I will critically evaluate each scholar’s approach and legacy in terms of understanding the Nasca’s visual system as a reflection of their lived social reality. I have split up the literature into three broad categories: early, middle, and late. The early period corresponds to when researchers believed the Nasca were directly influenced by well-known Mesoamerican cultures, usually the Aztec. The middle period is when the images are understood in more Andean-oriented cosmologies, usually the Inca. The late period of Nasca studies saw the shift from Inca-oriented to a more Nasca-oriented understanding of the culture, including the motifs on the polychrome vessels. It is at the end of this period that new archaeological analyses sheds light on a more centralized production system of the vessels as the basis for understanding the socio-politics of the time – the creation of a truer understanding of the social reality.

Early Nasca studies, with figures including Thomas Joyce and Edward Putnam, were predicated on attempting to identify Mesoamerican, or epi-cultural, characteristics within the iconography, as well as applying later Inca cosmological concepts to the analysis of Nasca art. They begin circa 1900 and continue through to approximately 1960. The images of the Nasca, at this point in the scholarship, were interpreted not on their own terms, but through other, more well-known cultures. The period of Middle Nasca studies begins with Alan Sawyer’s 1961 publication on Nasca iconography, and ends with Townsend’s 1985 curatorial overview of the Nasca collections at the Art Institute of Chicago. This ambiguous period is when scholars, while still under the rubric of highland ethnographies, nonetheless begin to pursue a more emic based understanding of Nasca
visuality, especially in attempting to locate ritual practitioners among the motifs. Late Nasca studies are defined by the debate over practitioner versus supernatural, what, if any, local variations may have existed and how that influenced the imagery, and giving greater cultural agency to the ancient society.

To reiterate, it will be the major surveys of Nasca iconography that will be under scrutiny. Particularly, I will be drawing out their foundational ideas concerning the nature of Nasca’s esoteric motifs in relation to the culture’s lived reality. As stated before, I believe the visuality of the polychrome vessels were not mere reflections of supernatural entities, or ancestral totems, or even observations of their natural world. Instead, these images played a vitally important ritual function in relation to warfare/agricultural/feasting practices, and were inspired by the unique environment of Perú’s southern desert coast.

Early Nasca Iconographic Studies

Nasca iconographic studies begin with British researcher Thomas Joyce in 1913, who utilized the British Museum’s thirty four Nasca ceramic vessels to write a brief article. In it, he asserted that the fantastical creatures may have been humans dressed in the guises of certain animals, though by no means espousing the entire corpus of images as human impersonators. It is with this study that begins the long succession of understanding the iconography as either human impersonators or true supernaturals. He based his views on ethno-historical accounts by early Andean explorers concerning

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indigenous peoples and believed that these impersonators were ancestral totemic
divinities that various *ayllus* would have claimed descent from.\(^{49}\) He drew from the
chronicler Garcilaso de la Vega who witnessed the ancient Inca’s performances in which actors dressed in animal costumes in correspondence to the animal totem signifying which *ayllu* they belonged.\(^{50}\) The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being itself is not explicitly
categorized, but it is assumed that Joyce considers this specific motif to be a human performer. What is important and has been carried through to this day from Joyce’s article is his introduction of the term “mouth-mask” which will become a defining feature of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being in later iconographic studies.\(^{51}\)

A year later, Edward K. Putnam published a similar article concerning Nasca
iconography based on Joyce’s interpretations. The sample he used was a medium-sized
collection of ninety four vessels housed in the Davenport Academy of Sciences, which
was donated to the academy by its president C. A. Ficke., hereafter known as the Ficke Collection.\(^{52}\) Directly citing Joyce, Putnam agrees that these images were humans dressed in costume in some sort of ancestral performative capacity.\(^{53}\) Even though the Ficke Collection was more than three times Joyce’s paltry sample set, the only personal contribution Putnam made was a classification of the motifs into the categories of: animal figures, figure vessels, rows of faces, human monster figures, and miscellaneous forms. As can be seen from his taxonomy, he lumped together broad categories that will later be understood in more finite categories; for example, in his animal figures he places birds,

\(^{49}\) Ibid. 117.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 112-113.
\(^{51}\) I will also utilize the term “mouth mask” because of its ubiquitous nature within the literature.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 26.
The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being is, like Joyce, not explicitly categorized as its own individual character within the Nasca visual system but should be seen as a human impersonator. Putnam’s work, though overly broad in its categorization of the motifs, will begin to define later iconographic studies as projects in attempting to group similar forms as seen on the polychrome vessels.

Horacio Urteaga published, from 1919 to 1928, several articles concerning the symbolism of the ceramic motifs (see Urteaga 1919a, 1919b, 1919c, 1919d, 1924, 1929). Utilizing the terms “fetishes,” “idols,” or “totems,” he classified the various symbols as religiously generated anthropomorphic representations. The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being does figure somewhat in his study, but as a totemic figure that is most likely a human impersonator, echoing Joyce’s earlier calls for the human performer interpretation. His contribution to the history of study concerning Nasca iconography was his interpretation that these motifs on the polychrome vessels were indeed visual formulations based on the largely unknown (at that time) Nasca religion and were composite motifs and not naturalistic depictions based on reality.

However, his study falls into the methodological trap of comparing an ancient and more esoteric culture to one that has been more readily documented, namely the Inca empire and its ethnography (as observed by the Western Spanish) as applied to the Nasca. In the first chapter I note that, while highland and Inca ethnographies are really the only source material which scholars can utilize for comparison, the fact that many of said

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54 Ibid., 23-24.
55 Ibid., 24.
56 e.g. Urteaga 1919a: 109-110.
57 See the sources: Urteaga 1919b; Urteaga 1919c; Urteaga 1919d. All of these are essentially small iconographic studies and commentaries concerning what he notes as similarities in symbolism between known Andean sources (Inca and contemporary) and the Nasca artifacts.
cultures, the Nasca included, are not highland in origin/nature and are also temporally removed from the later Quechuan expansion. Urteaga’s “symbolic analysis”\textsuperscript{58} is significant in this aspect because, while treating the motifs as direct precursors to the Inca’s symbolic system concerning the natural world, he does attempt to link the animals to known species in the Nasca area, as well as making conjectures about Nasca-centric ideas concerning how they would have viewed nature.

For example, he notes that the Nasca’s iconography has a high degree of aquatic fauna, something that is lacking in Inca works.\textsuperscript{59} Urteaga then proposes that the Nasca’s world was far more influenced by the sea than previously understood, and then attempts to make linkages between ethnographic mythic accounts of sea spirits and what he sees in the decoration of the Nasca pottery. I believe Urteaga’s analysis and understanding of the Nasca and their visual system is pivotal to a more Nasca-centered view. His studies, and there are many, were the first true attempts to see the Nasca as a separate (in his case, only somewhat) cultural system that was embedded within larger Andean social structures. While indeed utilizing highland ethnography, he nonetheless calls for a more nuanced interpretation of the motifs based on what he sees as enough differences within the visual decoration of the ceramics between the Inca and Nasca. His studies are not frequently cited, and his esotericism may have something to do with current interpretations as lacking in more emic based perspectives of the Nasca. Researchers

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 7-9.
could not reformulate their conception that the motifs are influenced from Mesoamerica, rather than culturally unique, and became mired in the epi-cultural trap.\(^60\)

A German by the name of Eduard Georg Seler was the first to publish a massive and comprehensive iconographic study of Nasca polychrome vessels. Trained as a botanist, he would later in his life find fascination in the ancient Americas and under the patronage of a wealthy philanthropist, Joseph Loubat, he undertook several excursions to Central America between 1881 and 1911 and became acquainted with Mesoamerican linguistics, calendrical systems, art, and culture.\(^61\) These journeys, also supplemented by Berlin’s museum collection of ancient American art, led him to create his famous five volume set of studies concerning almost everything having to do with ancient Mesoamerican culture: *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Altertumskunde*.

In his fourth volume, “Die buntbemalten Gefässe von Nazca im südlichen Peru und die Hauptelemente ihrer Verzierung,” Seler utilizes hundreds of images to tease out larger complexes found within the corpus of ceramic polychromes in the Berlin museum.\(^62\) This volume alone has over four hundred drawings of the vessels’ various motifs and has formed the foundation of almost all later iconographic undertakings concerning the ancient Nasca. Also a specialist in Amerindian languages, Seler’s immense study of the Nasca’s iconography attempts a typology derived from natural

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\(^60\) If I were to continue with this thesis, I would expand the scope of literature I am scrutinizing and note that this idea of epi-cultural comparison is not new to archaeological thinking. Indeed, it did seem fashionable in the mid-twentieth century to look beyond the culture under question for answers.

\(^61\) Proulx, 2006, 50.

classifications and similarities among the motifs of the ceramics. By grouping the
different motifs together based on their morphological similarities, Seler was beginning
to understand that the images were inspired by the surrounding natural phenomena of the
Nasca. No doubt his biological training played some part in this new conception of the
images, but what stands out most is the fact that he does not relegate these symbols to
pre-Inca motifs, but rather understands the pivotal role the environment had in how the
Nasca formulated their ritual imagery.

Seler’s typological methods yielded, for him, several distinct and overarching
categories of spirits, or “demons.” These classifications are still sometimes found in the
literature that discusses Nasca iconography, and this fact reveals how foundational Seler
was to understanding the Nasca’s ceramic motifs. Categories such as: “spotted cat,” “cat
demon,” “bird demon,” and “jagged-staff demon” all rely on Seler’s understanding of the
local fauna as seen through a Nasca artist’s hand. His interpretations are thoroughly
dissected through his numerous images, and while qualifiers like “demon” are outdated,
the similarities found within his categories are warranted and have proven pivotal in
teasing out the larger complexes that seem to structure the motifs.

The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being is such a complex that is featured heavily
in the section on the “Cat Demon.” Despite his incredible attention to detail, Seler does
not seem to identify the AMB as a specific and unique category of motif; he instead
lumps it under the larger “cat demon” classification. Additionally, Seler’s analysis is
heavily tainted by Mesoamerican stereotypes of imagery. When discussing snakes,
serpents, or other creatures with similar attributes, he mentions the Aztec conception of

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63 Ibid., 251.
the “feathered serpent” as a possible interpretation of the Nasca’s imagery (figure 3).64

The feathered serpent has never been found to have entered into South American mythos. By not appropriating a Nasca-centered view, Seler inadvertently adopted a Mesoamerican cosmology for the Nasca, stifling interpretation, and implying that the coastal desert culture was not its own source of artistic inspiration.

When Seler does cite ethnographic accounts of fauna of the Andes, he typically uses the Inca model of cosmology and relates whatever motifs he did not identify as Mesoamerican to the later Inca empire. This is the proverbial double-edged sword of Seler’s scholarship. While understanding the natural world’s role in constructing the Nasca’s visual system and its complex and multivalent nature, Seler’s interpretation is epi-cultural and even ahistorical. By taking the Nasca as a remnant of Mesoamerica and a simpler antecedent of the Inca, the visual system is not seen as a cultural window, but instead only as an aesthetic citation to greater historical cultures, simultaneously belittling the Nasca as only passive receivers and interpreters of culture.

Another scholar who is important to the analysis of Nasca ceramic iconography was Eugenio Yacovleff. Interestingly he, like Seler, was trained as a botanist at an agricultural school in Moscow but eventually came to appreciate Peruvian archaeology after spending a short time there on his way to America to grow fruit.65 He became acquainted with the National Museum and published several articles on his own analyses and typological classification of Nasca motifs.66 The Peruvian vencejo, or swift, as well

64 Ibid., 170. He mentions this several times actually, in addition to making other links to known Mesoamerican (usually Aztec) deities. The feathered serpent is the best example since I believe it is the most widely known Mesoamerican myth.
65 Proulx 2006, 50.
as many other bird types, were identified by Yacovleff and understood to be symbolically connected to warriors through the similar eye-markings seen in the polychrome imagery (figure 4).67 Yacovleff, while not explicitly stated, was undertaking a project in which he was beginning to see a more emic based perspective of the Nasca’s imagery. He notes the seasonality of certain birds, and even conjectures that they may have played some part in seasonal rituals that the polychrome ceramics would have been a key part of.68 This represents a full departure from Seler’s conception of the Nasca iconography as passive visual regurgitation of the natural environment to one of active cultural recording – the process of symbolic construction of motifs within discursive systems. The fact that he notes how the Nasca were utilizing avian motifs for their warriors shows that he is considering how the Nasca themselves appropriated the natural world into their ritual imagery. This is in opposition to the practice of considering how, say, the Inca view birds and then applying the Inca conception of birds to the Nasca.

Another key observation Yacovleff introduced to studies on Nasca ceramic visuality was the killer whale’s obvious presence within the corpus of known Nasca polychromes.69 In this article published in 1932, he notes the predilection the killer whale motif has in appropriating other mythical animals into its body, as well as being singularly recognizable. Because of this, Yacovleff is convinced that the motif represents the Nasca’s most important mythical creature. His study of this particular image reveals that it is associated, in some contexts, with plants, while almost always having

68 Ibid., 27, 34-35.
69 Ibid., 1932.
connections with warrior imagery (holding spears and trophy heads). Most controversially, he attempted to prove that the killer whale gradually became associated with a larger warrior, agricultural cult that took shape during the Nasca’s time. Whether or not Yacovleff’s interpretation of such a cult’s existence is accurate, he importantly, and explicitly, denied diffusionist tendencies of scholars in his analyses. His contribution to Nasca scholarship is both similar to Seler’s in terms of a rigorous, natural history-inspired typology, and yet different in his understanding of the local environment’s influence on the visual system. By further noting the high degree of similarity between the images found on the ritual vessels and the local fauna of the Nasca region, Yacovleff advanced iconographic understanding considerably.

Unfortunately, he does not address the possibility of some of the images representing actual ritual practitioners, warriors, or Nasca people in general. For him, the natural world was the perfect exemplar of visual inspiration for the Nasca, and the images found on their ceramics were a painted reflection of indigenous peoples’ conception of spirits. In other words, the motifs were relegated to supernatural symbols associated with agriculture, devoid of mundane secular associations and that float upon the vessels’ surface; portraits of esoteric animal spirits, nothing more.

Another German, Karl Schleiser, also published a massive treatise on Nasca iconography in which he sets out to understand the role of warfare and trophy-head taking practices within the visual system. He believes that the Nasca’s cosmology was

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70 Ibid., 106-108.
71 Ibid., 148.
72 Ibid., see ending comments on pages 158-160.
centered on the ritual practice of trophy heads and their associative spiritual forces.\textsuperscript{74} By looking at motifs such as the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, Killer Whale, etc., and noting the high degree of trophy heads, such an interpretation is not unfounded. Indeed, their extreme presence within the corpus of images certainly points to a culture obsessed with ritual head-hunting.

Despite Schleiser’s attempts at reconciling the images within a more emic perspective, he fails to fully carry out this operation when he cites Mesoamerican deities as cultural progenitors of the Nasca’s “deities.”\textsuperscript{75} Not all of the supernatural entities are related to Mesoamerican mythical systems; he does mention Moche, Chavín, and Paracas as possible influences. Seler, undoubtedly, must have influenced Schleiser’s conceptions of the motifs, and heavily references the “rain god,” “earth god,” and “moon god” many times, even going so far as to include illustrations of Mesoamerican codices to attempt to show the connections between the two culture areas.\textsuperscript{76}

Once again, a scholar has attempted to maintain a tenuous link to some other distant and greater culture concerning the Nasca’s production of their visual system. The natural world as the place for iconographic inspiration is implied in Schleiser’s work, and his contribution is most certainly in the understanding of the Nasca as a society ritually centered on trophy heads. Unfortunately for him, the larger associations of warfare, agriculture, and specific animal types was either overlooked or not believed to be important enough for inclusion in the study. The idea of ritual practitioners present within the iconography was also lacking. For him the motifs are, as for Yacovleff, entirely

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 121.  
\textsuperscript{75} E.g., ibid., 152.  
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 150.
spiritual representations and not a combination of sacred and more mundane phenomena reflecting their social and cultural reality. Schleiser and his analyses are what I consider to be the last moment in Nasca studies in which the images are understood as epi-cultural and/or singularly supernatural. Besides Joyce, most up until this point have determined that the mythical nature of the visual system is one depicting a spirit world, rather than a world in which the Nasca could have operated, and that these images were derived from Mesoamerican cosmology and discourse.

Middle Nasca Iconographic Studies

With the death of Yacovleff in 1934, the Nasca’s visual system may have been forever relegated to a Mesoamerican offshoot until Alan Sawyer’s publication. Having worked at the Art Institute of Chicago, Sawyer had access to numerous ceramic specimens and a prodigious amount of images. His work on the earlier culture of Paracas gave him an immense understanding of the chronology of Perú’s south coast, and also provided the first key understanding of Nasca cultural characteristics as a local, rather than epi-cultural, invention.77

Sawyer traces several particular motifs that are commonly seen throughout the Nasca ceramic iconography, illustrating that they were not from Mesoamerica, but from Paracas, the cultural antecedent of the Nasca.78 The major example is the jaguar motif. He notes that jaguar types are not seen in the south coast and that this image was a

78 Ibid., 270 – 273.
holdover from the earlier Chavín highland culture.\textsuperscript{79} This removes the idea that the Nasca were directly influenced from Mesoamerican cultures, yet still retains the highland ethnographic bias. The biological fact remains that the jaguar species is not native to the Andes and certainly did not live in the desert areas once occupied by the Nasca. This is the second scholar thus far (after Yacovleff) who explicitly denounced the Mesoamerican/Andean dialectic in favor of more Andean-oriented analyses.

In 1968 Donald Proulx published his thesis concerning the chronological sequence of Nasca ceramics and associated iconography.\textsuperscript{80} This work further echoes Sawyer’s attempts to draw on the Andes for analytic inspiration concerning the Nasca’s visual system. Proulx’s work specifically was attempting to discern the geographic and temporal boundary point between the Paracas and Nasca civilizations. Drawing on the similarities between the Paracas textiles and the later Nasca ceramics, Proulx successfully links the two cultures through their artistic conventions, setting the stage for his later work. More importantly, it is in this publication that Proulx coins the term “Anthropomorphic Mythical Being” and discusses the possibility of the motif as a ritual practitioner.\textsuperscript{81}

Drawing on iconographic studies of the Moche civilization to the north of the Nasca, Proulx later publishes an article in which he outlines the thematic approach to understanding Nasca art.\textsuperscript{82} The thematic approach involves interpreting recurring, similar sets of motifs as signifying “themes” within Nasca art. These recurring similar sets may

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 279.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., he states this several times throughout the work; the symbolic context is mentioned on page 35.
\textsuperscript{82} Donald Proulx, “A Thematic Approach to Nasca Mythical Iconography.” In \textit{Faenza: Bollettino del Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche de Faenza} 75 (4-6): 141 – 158.
not be fully visualized each time they appear within the ceramic corpus, but would
nevertheless be interpreted by the Nasca as a representation of the larger theme. A perfect
corollary is found in Christian art. The visual “theme” of the Christian nativity scene does
not necessarily need to include all the major and minor characters of the story for it to be
understood as a nativity scene. For whatever reason, certain aspects of the nativity
scene/theme may be left out of the overall composition. These deficiencies do not detract
from the understanding that the scene presented before the viewer is of the Christian
nativity, but that it is simply visually abbreviated.

When viewing Nasca art, it becomes incredibly apparent that they heavily utilized
this visual abbreviation as an aesthetic method of image construction. Proulx’s thematic
approach is the first explicit attempt at how to reconstruct the iconography in terms of a
more culturally sensitive analysis. He attempts to locate found “themes” within the
corpus of images and concludes that the agricultural/warfare complex of motifs is the
dominant system represented in the polychromes.\(^\text{83}\) Citing Panofsky and Peirce, two
theorists known for their work in the methodology of iconography, Proulx attempts to
place the motifs found on the vessels within the small but steadily increasing literature on
the anthropological and archaeological understandings of Nasca society.\(^\text{84}\) The
Anthropomorphic Mythical Being is the featured example of how to apply the thematic
approach to Nasca iconography. He notes the similarities between the numerous AMB
eamples in terms of their costume elements and attached and hybridized motifs.\(^\text{85}\)

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 157-158.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., 147 – 148.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 149.
Specifically, he notes the AMB and its heavy association between trophy heads and agricultural images, marking the transition to an emic analysis.

The last scholar who I will place in the Middle Nasca studies period is Richard Townsend, with his article on Nasca ceramic iconography. His inclusion in this middle phase of the scholarship is for two reasons. The first is because his understanding of the images is based explicitly on an understanding of Mesoamerican visual systems. While he convincingly discerns that there are indeed human impersonators portrayed on the vessels, I believe he then goes too far when stating that there were no overarching supernatural characters in the images, and that they portrayed nothing more than warriors and farmers in the guise of deities that look similar, but were probably not understood as a singular entity (figure 5). The Nasca probably believed in an actual supernatural that looked, and acted, like the AMB found on the ritual vessels, thus my reason for downplaying Townsend’s views. His analysis disregards the probable mythical attributions the Nasca made towards their natural world, and still forces a non-Nasca understanding of the images. How does Townsend know that the Nasca did not have specific culture heroes known to the entire society? And if the images are lacking supernatural qualities, how can he possibly rectify the bizarre and obviously non-real creatures displayed on the vessels? He does not state the Nasca had no mythical ideologies, yet his analysis is decidedly lacking in any notion of symbolic contexts that may be surrounding the different motifs.

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87 Ibid., 138 – 139.
What this article is important for, I believe, is how he is conceptualizing the iconography through the eyes of a living reality. He notes that there is a visual similarity between farmers’ digging sticks and warriors’ clubs in the corpus of images. This insight then led to the possibility of an agricultural/warfare complex as the most important visual theme on the ceramics. Indeed, the AMB is overwhelmingly shown with these digging sticks/ war clubs and is intimately attached to this larger agricultural/warfare complex.\textsuperscript{88}

Townsend further touches upon the Nasca’s possible social reality when he discusses seasonality within the images. By noting (after Yacovleff,) that certain animals found within the iconographic system are seasonally observed in the Nasca’s environment, Townsend is beginning to “see” the iconography as the Nasca would.

**Late Nasca Iconographic Studies**

Blasco and Ramos produced the last extensive survey of Nasca ceramic images in the 1980s. The Museum of America in Madrid’s collection provided their publication with hundreds of images, which then allowed them to map out additional themes that are present in the corpus of Nasca images.\textsuperscript{89} Primarily, their attention was focused not on the iconography so much as vessel typology and classification. For each vessel they analyzed, a drawing was generated that showed a section of the vessel and material composition. Their classification of the motifs is highly morphological; examples of categories that appear are “geometric,” “plants,” “human figures,” etc., and clearly do not attempt a

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 138 – 140. For Townsend, the AMB figure in the corpus does not represent a single deity that is shown with slight differences; it is a collection of different felinoid deity impersonators. 

deeper symbolic understanding. What they do accurately and convincingly observe is that the artifacts that are found in the tombs of Nasca elite personages appear as costume devices on some of the motifs, the AMB is noted in particular.\textsuperscript{90}

It is the connection between elite status and the motifs that I wish to highlight here, showing that researchers began to rigorously contextualize these images within the archaeological record rather recently. Blasco and Ramos, while eschewing any symbolic interpretations regarding speculative cosmological systems, completely define the Nasca and their associated visual system not through Mesoamerica, or even the Inca, but solely on what has been identified by previous archaeologists in Nasca tombs. It is this approach that still needs to be explicitly understood to provide a better perspective on how the Nasca themselves may have read their polychrome images.

Patrick Carmichael, in 1994, furthered Nasca studies by attempting to understand the cosmology of the Nasca through his perceived connections among the motifs.\textsuperscript{91} He discusses the idea of “metonymy” within the iconography, which is similar to my “visual abbreviation” observation mentioned above.\textsuperscript{92} Through the clear associations of trophy heads, blood, vegetal rebirth, and the Nasca’s practice of mortuary bundles, Carmichael asserts that the Nasca conceived of their lifespans as analogous to plant cycles, and that the blood from taking trophy heads was the supernatural catalyst which diffused a life-essence throughout the universe, something the Nasca were distinctly aware of.\textsuperscript{93} He discusses Nasca burial practices as well, noting that there is evidence of intentional bloodletting of the head before death (found in the skeletal remains of the ancient Nasca),

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 1980, 214.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 83.
as well as the common practice of head-taking after death. These practices are tied into Carmichael’s larger cosmology for the Nasca, where he relates them to the imagery and polychromes themselves, finally speculating that the agricultural/warfare complex is indeed the major visual framework for the pottery.

Carmichael is continuing what Blasco and Ramos initiated, and by including actual and ubiquitous burial rituals, further places the iconography found on the vessels within an emergent picture of how the Nasca truly used to live. No longer read as recordings of passive observers of “supernatural” phenomena, the Nasca’s symbolism surrounding their aesthetic practices is revealed to be based on sources of social reality and is also influenced by life cycles of the natural world around them, resulting in a unique cosmology that is neither Mesoamerican, nor Inca but singularly Nasca.

It is surprising, then, that Proulx in his large work on the iconography of the Nasca does not reflect such attitudes. Published in 2006, this work was an attempt at an all-inclusive understanding of the Nasca and their visuality. Citing various methodologies of “art history,” “archaeology,” “ethnography,” and “comparative mythology,” Proulx gives the impression that a multi-disciplinary approach has furthered interpretations within the scholarship. While making methodological claims, Proulx fails at constructing a new interpretive framework that has not already been elucidated. He splits up the motifs into four broad categories of “supernatural,” “ritual,” “intermediate ritual/secular,” and finally “secular.” These categories are highly problematic in terms of approaching an emic perspective because of the simple fact that negotiating between the “sacred” and the “secular” was probably more dynamic and unmediated than what Western cultures

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Ibid., 83 – 84.
conceive of. How do we know that some of the “humans” that Proulx unconvincingly attributes to the “secular” category were regarded as such by the Nasca?95

The archaeologist Kevin Vaughn, while not particularly analyzing the iconography, nevertheless has interesting insights into how to understand the visual system’s place within the Nasca civilization. Social power is created, extended, and exerted in ancient societies, through ritualistic interchanges between more-elite and less-elite. Instead of looking at the polychromes vessels as simply ritual feasting vessels with supernatural motifs adorning them, Vaughn discusses them as “materializations of chiefly power” that were utilized in projects of power building among the ancient Nasca’s elite.96 Because the Nasca never achieved a centralized, state-level society, reciprocity as an economic mode of exchange was pivotal in maintaining social relations.97

Conclusion

Nasca studies have certainly come a long way in terms of understanding the nature of their ceramic iconography. Initially thought of as a vestige of greater Mesoamerican cultures, the visual system of the ancient Andean south coast is now understood as portraying a multitude of characters, motifs, themes, etc. that are tied to a cosmological system concerned with sacred blood from trophy heads as sustaining the cosmos and their culture. It took almost half a century to divorce the Nasca from northern

95 E.g., pages 123, 124, 126 show humans, but with attributes such as fox-skin headdresses and vegetal materials that clearly are attempting to portray another layer of meaning attached to the images.


97 Ibid., 115.
civilizations, and just as long to finally place archaeological findings alongside what is being portrayed upon the polychromes’ surfaces. Understanding the archaeological context has been pivotal in not only understanding the Nasca’s iconography, but also their larger socio-political structures in general. The next chapter deals specifically with understanding the visual system as a mode of Foucaultian discourse by looking at one motif in particular, the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, which I believe serves as a microcosmic example of how to understand the larger corpus of images.
Chapter 3: Nasca Images As Social Reality – Natural and Cultural Worlds Combined

For many scholars, the images the Nasca painted on their polychromes were either relegated to the supernatural world, observations of the natural world, or some mixture of both. While the iconography does indeed draw heavily from the Nasca’s surrounding environment, and is likely imbued with supernatural meaning, many scholars do not go beyond this viewpoint, citing the esoteric nature of the motifs as too vague and abstract to understand in any sufficient depth. I am arguing that there are indeed enough conventional elements corresponding to social reality within the iconographic assemblage of the Nasca to begin to understand these images. They are not just esoteric mystical motifs that are drawn from the natural world, but are concrete depictions drawn from the ritual and cultural systems that were dominant during the Nasca culture’s florescence and decline. This chapter deals with the iconographic understanding of this concept foregrounded with the specific motif of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being (AMB), and how this motif can provide a window into the social reality of the ancient Nasca peoples.

Theoretically, the visual system of the Nasca culture should be understood as a mode of discourse, one that was drawn heavily from the antecedent Paracas culture, located just north of the Nasca cultural region. Discourse, according to Foucault, is a system of knowledge, constructed by individuals and culture, whose goal was ideological control that produced organizations, or apparatuses, of power.\textsuperscript{98} Instead of a written language serving as the primary vehicle for, and of, discourse, in the case of the Nasca, I

\textsuperscript{98} Foucault 1972.
believe that the images themselves acted as propagators of discourse. As a system of signs and associations, these images would have been understood within their cultural framework as markers of ritual and political power which Cahuachi and the independent elites of the various sites were utilizing. Structurally, though, this self-regulating system can be subjected to instances of direct or indirect subversions, producing new modes of meaning.

Thus, ultimately, the iconography was thoroughly enmeshed within relations and projects of power formation. Through new archaeological techniques now shedding light on the provenance of the ceramics, I argue that the Nasca visual imagery is a discursive visual system, echoing the newly understood sociopolitical and cultural environment in which they were produced, something that has yet to be fully realized in the scholarly literature. In the case of the AMB I would like to posit that the creature is dressed in regalia that would signify socio-ritual status. Most likely, it was the elites of the independent Nasca communities who engaged in leading ritual performances and rites.\(^99\) Polychrome pottery was monopolized by the Nasca ritual and pilgrimage center of Cahuachi\(^100\) and would serve as the primary vehicles for elite ritual consumption and prestige upon returning from this sacred center.\(^101\)

This chapter will be broken into sections that explore the iconographic record of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being as an exemplar of understanding the imagery of Nasca iconography as a visual discursive system. This particular figure features prominently throughout the corpus of the polychrome ritual ceramics and is shown in a

\(^{99}\) Vaughn 2005, 128. 
\(^{100}\) Ibid., 128. 
\(^{101}\) Kantner and Vaughn 2012, 68.
semi-conventionalized form with myriad attached signifiers, or bodies, creating a multivalent symbolic creature. I will explain an approach to understanding the visuality of Nasca imagery and how it can be read in its specific stylistic conventions. Before delving into these multivalent systems, I would like to point out what elements signify the AMB in the iconographic record, especially noting that these are items that seem to be elite status paraphernalia.

**Symbolic Compression – Interpreting the Nasca Visual System**

The Nasca’s image production is one in which a highly abstracted motif is assembled from its most essential identifying elements, a process I will call symbolic compression. This is the simplification – compression – of multiple motifs and collapse of their spatial attributes onto a single vessel or figure in order to convey as much meaning in a limited space as possible. I had mentioned previously that the Nasca “visually abbreviate” certain motifs to present a theme, which is a key aspect of symbolic compression. The AMB is a perfect example, as will be shown later, of a visual icon that is symbolically compressed in multiple ways, from full-bodied figures to just depicting the head, with varying amounts of body and associated motifs shown.

This practice collapses the various motifs into highly rigid two dimensional images that make them difficult to interpret. Figures are presented in positions which initially seem contorted, disproportional, and enigmatic, while some motifs appear to be flying or swimming (e.g., see figure 5). Nasca artists had no real aesthetic devices for spatial production within their imagery and instead encoded the images with symbolic,
rather than naturalistic, qualities that were far more pertinent to rituals than a realistically rendered motif. The images, in other words, needed to be understood more in their symbolic frameworks rather than as pleasing aesthetic reconstructions of the natural environment around them. Additionally, visual abbreviation, as a form of symbolic compression, most likely had more utilitarian functions as well. Because the surfaces of the polychromes are rounded, the Nasca artist only had so many options and technologies available to ensure that the correct ritual information was visible on a curved surface.

If space is compressed, then it would be interesting to entertain the notion that time and movement might be similarly condensed. The depiction of action seems to occur in a limited amount of images and when it does, is more inferred than directly shown. Some of the iconography seems to beg for an understanding that action is being presented. Images of people in a line may indicate activities such as ritual processions or war marches, but beyond that there are no other indicators present in the Nasca iconography that explicitly confirms motion. It is easy to fall to prey to the trap of analyzing a series of figures as something of a procession, yet for the Nasca I would argue that unless more contextual evidence is presented, repetition should not be understood in terms of temporal and physical movement.

The few scenes of what may indicate ritual activity are also shown with the figures in condensed and static poses. On other vessels, some of these figures are seen standing alone with various motifs attached to their bodies that were not present in the original scene. This is what I meant earlier by thematic compression. Figures with notable headdresses can be identified within the iconographic corpus on the ceramics in two ways: participating in some sort of scene or action and being singularly presented on
the pottery (see figure 13 as compared to Figure 3). These figures are also often shown with far more associated motifs when depicted alone than when they are interacting with other characters. While probably depicting the same figure, the fact that it is shown with far less attached imagery is probably due to the Nasca’s symbolic compression. Instead of having to show all the symbolic accoutrements, the headdress is what serves to identify the character. The Nasca reader would then attach the culturally constructed associations to the simplified image without having to be presented with all of the visual symbols. This would mean that other figures in the Nasca system of representation may be parts of established narratives that are now lost.

My synthetic approach to the reading of Nasca iconography involves three principles. The first is that the imagery utilizes symbolic compression in the formal arrangements of motifs upon the vessels to ensure enough visual information is available to the viewer to interpret the larger meanings surrounding the symbolism of the images. Secondly, the symbolic connection between nature/landscape and culture is a key attribute of these images, similar to both Townsend and Joyce’s view of the images. They are depictions of both supernatural and actual beings of the Nasca world; spirits of the environment that are likewise emulated through ritual performance. Lastly, these images must now be read within the social context that it is appearing through new archaeological data and theory to better understand how the Nasca themselves would have comprehended these polychrome vessels and their accompanying motifs.

Understanding the Political Context: The Ritual-Elite AMB and its Social Associations
Now that the basic visual conventions and approaches to the AMB have been established, I will turn towards the particular aspects of the Nasca culture, in relation to their visual system.\textsuperscript{102} The AMB’s presence within the iconographic system is large and can be used to interpret their art as reflecting the social reality of the contemporary time in which it was utilized. The two-dimensional images on the polychrome ceramics are the primary motifs I will be analyzing. These ceramics include both the various feasting vessels as well as other ceramic objects, such as effigies (see figure 6) and drums that clearly show the AMB and its conventionalized system of motifs that aid in its identification.

Figure 7 presents a typical Anthropomorphic Mythical Being from the Early Nasca Period. On top of the head is a small crown, or coronet, that may or may not have an additional small rounded element above it. This element can take the form of a simple colored semi-circle or in more elaborate cases a fox-skin headdress. In more realistic portrayals of the AMB, or in some cases a human performer impersonating the AMB, the fox-skin headdress is clearly discernible (for an example, see figure 8). These headdresses have been found in a small number of mortuary contexts.\textsuperscript{103} The coronet has been identified in the archaeological record of the Paracas culture as a cut sheet gold piece with hammered details that carried over into the later Nasca periods, both cultures using it as an obvious indicator of status.\textsuperscript{104}

The remaining two motifs that typify the AMB figure also seem to be items of elite status. What Proulx cites as “bangles,” the terminology I will also utilize, hang down

\textsuperscript{102} These will mainly be regarding agriculture and warfare, as these are the dominant themes in Nasca art.
\textsuperscript{103} Blasco and Ramos, 1986, 10.
\textsuperscript{104} Valdez, 1998, 15, 50.
both sides of the AMB’s head. These are typically shown in groups of three or four circles with what appear to be perforations in the center, though none have yet to be archaeologically recovered. The other item is the whiskered mouth-mask covering the lower portion of the AMB’s face, usually shown with small faces on either side. An example of this has been recovered from the Nasca region itself\textsuperscript{105} and, like the gold corona, is a cut sheet of gold with hammered details. This mouth-mask is very much an indicator of elite status, and was worn by personages of higher rank at least during ritual, or more generally, important religious and political rites and ceremonies.

It is the relation between Cahuachi and the independent communities of the Nasca that can provide interesting insight into the social nature of the polychrome ceramics. Kantner and Vaughn proposed a model of “costly signal” to interpret the relations between the pilgrim-elites of communities and why they would undertake journeys to sacred centers. For the Nasca, the pilgrimage center (Cahuachi) can be seen as a site which signals “hidden qualities” of its religious leaders. These qualities refer to covert competition between pilgrim elites (as opposed to outright warfare) and an association with a powerful religious site to guarantee that the natural and spiritual climate remains hospitable to ensure agricultural fertility.\textsuperscript{106} The independent elites would attend rituals to legitimize their social position. Monumental projects are initiated under the supervision of Cahuachi’s elites and the incoming peoples to create “spectacle” and ceremony that demonstrate Cahuachi’s influence over both the supernatural and natural worlds. In the end, the pilgrims would be “signaling” their adherence to the religious and moral system promulgated by Cahuachi. This enhanced the pilgrims’ reputation and instilled behavior

\textsuperscript{105} Marzio 2007, 76-77.
\textsuperscript{106} Kantner and Vaughn 2012, 70.
that positively affected interpersonal interactions back within their respective communities and promoted communally acceptable behavior.\footnote{Ibid., 78.}

Pilgrimage was the process Cahuachi used to construct not only itself but also the ceramics which were utilized in the socially important ritual feasts. As Vaughn et. al. have attested through isotropic analysis of the ceramics across the Nasca region and clay beds found throughout the same survey area, it was a site very near Cahuachi that lent its clay to over 80\% of all Early and Middle (ca. 300-500 CE) Nasca polychrome vessels.\footnote{Vaughn et. al. 2005, 689.} Given this, it is most likely the case that the pilgrim-elites and attached persons would take back large amounts of the vessels for further distribution among the people of their respective communities.\footnote{Kantner and Vaughn 2011, 78.} Feasting rituals would then be instigated by the elites, through the vehicle of the polychromes, and thus accorded ritual status to the feast holders. Thus, the Nasca region’s separate communities would have understood their elites’ associations with the sacred center through the act of pilgrimage.

What’s interesting in regard to the AMB in this context of (re)distribution of the ceramics is its centrality to the iconographic system. While non-agricultural imagery is actually more the exception than the rule in the entire corpus of Early and Middle Nasca ceramics,\footnote{Silverman 1993, 227-29.} it is the AMB in its myriad forms which seems to dominate the imagery.\footnote{Proulx 2006.} I can offer no immediate interpretation as to why the AMB is the primary image seen in the Nasca iconography, though this fact does signal that it was important to the Nasca in a way that goes beyond the context of the ceramics and ritual feasting. Because it is dressed as an elite personage, along with its other associations of agriculture and seasons,
this creature may have had a more cosmologically important position than previously assumed.

Musicality and Performance – the AMB and Musical Instruments

An additional point to make in the AMB’s reflection of an elite ritual performer is the image’s proclivity to be placed on ceramic musical instruments and in direct association with musical motifs. Recovered from archaeological contexts are ceramic panpipes and drums, found in both mortuary contexts as well as domestic settings. Silverman found numerous panpipe fragments littered across the landscape at the ceremonial center of Cahuachi in contexts of ritual feasting, as well as atop the monumental mounds that were utilized for large public ceremonies. Ceramic drum fragments have not been properly identified among the ceramic remains at the site, but this may be attributed to Nasca mortuary customs. The drums are often found in ritual deposits buried underground, sometimes in the context of burials. Whether a panpipe or drum, both musical instrument types, as seen thus far in the archaeological record, show a predilection towards utilizing the AMB as the primary motif.

The Dallas Museum of Art holds a perfect example of a Nasca ceramic drum which incorporates the AMB in its overall composition (figure 9). The body and head of the AMB are the body and end-piece to the drum, creating an almost effigy-like depiction. The mouth-mask can be seen and rises up and around the eyes terminating at the nose.

113 Ibid., 241-43.
114 Ibid., 240.
The coronet can be seen painted in its typical tripartite fashion, each piece ending in a simplified face with one in the center. There appears to be no fox-skin headdress and the square spondylus shell necklace is shown below the mouth-mask. In the left hand of the AMB is held a war club and trophy head, while the right hand holds a single trophy head. The bottom of the drum would have been covered with some form of animal skin and played with the head of the drum, in this case the head of the AMB, between the legs.\textsuperscript{116}

The AMB’s image is also a primary motif found on ceramic panpipes. While there are examples with simple iconography depicting agricultural products or geometric designs, when shown with more complex iconography, the AMB is a primary motif. A good example of this is shown in Christiane Clados’ reconstruction drawings of Nasca ceramic iconography. Clados Number 86 (figure 10) depicts the AMB from the back with the figure looking up at the viewer. The mouth-mask and coronet are clearly shown on the face. There are two bangles on either side attached to the ends of the coronet, though they are probably meant to be read as attached to the ears. Interestingly, the AMB’s left hand is shown holding another coronet, possibly alluding to the figure’s status with the other hand holding a trophy head.

Another panpipe, (figure 11), is from an earlier Nasca style (Nasca 2; ca. 200-300 CE) showing the temporal depth of the AMB’s association with panpipes. The imagery is slightly awkward, but the mouth-mask can still be seen curling around the mouth, out of which emanates some creature with a single eye, and also curls up towards the eyes and away, similar to the ceramic drum that is also from an earlier Nasca stylistic phase. The coronet is large and placed above the eyes with the characteristic face in the center and

\textsuperscript{116}Proulx 2006, 120.
simplified faces on the horizontal rays. Below the mouth-creature is the spondylus necklace, also shown, albeit in a blocky format, going around the neck and up past the mouth-mask.

Music seems to be embedded within the body, visually, as well. Figure 12 is an example of an AMB which is shown holding a captive, or rather one half of a captive, in each hand. The human figure is split and between the two halves are simplified panpipes with tail ends placed next to each other, somewhat resembling human hearts. Whether this draws an association between panpipes and other parts of the body or something the Nasca believed was within the human body has yet to be deciphered. However, the presence of the AMB with a ritual captive is a typical rendition of the image, usually shown with trophy heads, and so may allude to some practice of ritualized sacrifices and music.

Rituals, with music, would have been an important part of the Nasca’s social and cultural reality as these performances brought entire communities together for services to propitiate supernatural forces. There are extremely rare instances of entire scenes depicted in the early Nasca Phases, and one such scene depicts a performer holding a panpipe with additional panpipes decorating the very dress the person is wearing (figure 13). The panpipe resembles the Nasca stylized hands, and in some cases, is shown simply as a hand, which may indicate a symbolic connection between the instrument and the shape of the human hand. Around the central figure are people that seem to be going about either preparing for, or in the process of enacting, a ritual. Numerous bowls and jars, shown in an x-ray fashion with caps, surround the figures. The two figures to the left are standing in profile facing one another, both holding panpipes and flanking a vessel.
The two figures to the left are holding up what appears to be a war club (discussed later) and may be moving towards the central figure. There is also a plant with something placed in the left side and may refer to the San Pedro cactus which was utilized by numerous Pre-Columbian Andean cultures as a hallucinogen in ritual contexts.\(^{117}\)

This scene shows a frontally facing figure in elite regalia, the spondylus shell necklace and some form of headdress, being heralded by figures that are in an obvious setting of performance. Despite the lack of clear evidence placing an AMB figure in a similar setting of ritual and musical performance, it would not be overly hypothetical to conjecture that the image was indeed tied into real performances somehow. It is clear that the AMB’s association with musical and elite paraphernalia contribute to my proposition that this being is a reflection of the actual living reality the Nasca would have experienced.

Homologous Elements – Agriculture and Warfare

Symbolically, the AMB’s strongest link thus far has been with agricultural fertility and trophy heads.\(^{118}\) Proulx (1968) was the first to make this direct association in understanding Nasca iconography as a symbolic system of the Nasca religion. Later, it was Carmichael (1992 and 1994) who established the idea of the “life to death continuum” which, according to him, the imagery seemed to evoke. This idea is also seen by Frame who works on deciphering the meaning of Paracas textile iconography.\(^{119}\) Interestingly,

\(^{117}\) Proulx 2006, 85.
\(^{119}\) Mary Frame, “Blood, Fertility, and Transformation: Interwoven Themes on the Paracas
the Paracas culture, which gave the later Nasca culture its visual system, had incredibly similar symbolic connotations regarding death and agricultural fertility. As seen in figure 14 from Seler’s iconographic study, an AMB figure from Paracas can clearly be seen in a back-bent position, with the mouth-mask, coronet, and bangles on either side of the face. In both examples they hold beans, something Frame believes the burials of Paracoid peoples, wrapped in numerous textiles, are symbolically associated with in the afterlife. The deceased’s body is thus the life-giving generator, or seed, of the crops for the living.  

There is thus a clear foundation of beliefs for the Nasca to then interpret the imagery of trophy heads and vegetal material as having similar conceptions within their worldview. Carmichael focuses on one motif in particular, the “sprouting head,” to fully articulate this idea of the life to death continuum, and that the ancient Nasca believed that ritual trophy head taking was an act which perpetuated agricultural fertility and ensured the communities’ livelihood. This particular motif is consistently shown attached to the back of the AMB and further aggrandizes the motif’s symbolic links with the Nasca everyday realm (figures 11 and 15).

The AMB is also shown simply holding what has been identified as different agricultural foodstuffs throughout the Early and Middle Nasca Periods (ca. 100-500 CE; see figure 9). The Nasca were agriculturalists who produced a wide variety of crops despite living in an extremely arid environment, and agriculture was a major part of their

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120 Ibid., 69-72.
121 Carmichael 1994, 83.
122 Sawyer 1979, 147 and 148 (figure 26).
ritual and social life. Because of the AMB’s semi-impersonator status within the iconography, it could be assumed that such instances of it being shown with different agricultural products may be related to rituals of crop fertility and continuation.

The trophy heads play a major part in this overarching theme of agricultural fertility. Conlee discusses a headless burial from the Nasca region, as well as other similar archaeological mortuary contexts. As noted by De Leonardis, Conlee states that some bodies in headless burials have been found with “replacement heads” in the form of polychrome ceramic head jars. Vaughn has discovered additional evidence that headless jars are actually relegated to more elite personages in both domestic and, more applicably, mortuary contexts. In terms of their symbolism, and as seen from the burial example Conlee is mainly discussing (see figure 10), head jars are consistently shown with plant material sprouting from the top of the painted head, creating a direct ceramic example that is found in the iconography and furthering the association of ritually severed heads as a vehicle which drives agricultural fertility.

Other elements that strengthen these symbolic associations within the iconographic system are the war clubs/digging sticks which the AMB is consistently shown holding (see figures 11). Scholars are divided on this issue; most, if not all, do not

123 Vaughn 2009, 53.
124 Here it should be understood that the AMB was probably read as either the deity, or the people impersonating the supernatural character. Again, this nuance is not explicitly stated in Townsend, 1985, and I wish to remind the reader to not fall into the same ontological trap.
125 The AMB as a general ritual impersonator, a la Townsend 1985, is the major view: that the AMB was not conceived of as a singular deity, but represents numerous felinoid supernaturals. I do not believe this is the case, because of the centralized production taking place at Cahuachi. Thus, the AMB is a singularly recognizable deity to the Nasca, just shown in many different, abbreviated forms.
128 Conlee 2007, 440.
state a particular reason for identifying either club or a digging stick, and draw from highland Andean ethnography, and associate the images with farmers, or that they are warriors and the implements depicted are weapons. Townsend reads the many frontally facing human figures shown with beans and other vegetal matter in the Nasca visual system, along with these ambiguous implements, as farmers and specifically not warriors.\textsuperscript{129} What he does not account for is the fact that these “farmers” are shown with trophy heads, the vertical lines through the mouth indicating they were sewn shut. These figures may or may not be dead warriors, but could be generally read as having a place within the known symbolic associations of death and fertility. I would argue that these symbols, the digging stick and war club, act as homologous components of this overarching symbolic connection between warfare/trophy head taking and the promotion of agricultural fertility.

The Timing of Agriculture – Seasonality in Context of the AMB

The last section of this chapter deals with the depictions of seasons with the use of specific animal imagery. Agriculture would have been, for the Nasca, highly contingent upon the larger environmental forces within the river valleys and would be at the mercy of seasonal rainfall. It was Yacovleff who first introduced the idea that the varying animal motifs may be seasonally oriented, and noted that several examples from the iconography do only appear at the beginning or during the rainy seasons of the South

\textsuperscript{129} Townsend 1985, 125.
Coast of Peru.\textsuperscript{130} This would have been the time the Nasca began the agricultural process and there would have most likely been accompanying rituals to ensure an environmentally benevolent and productive season.

There are two primary animals which are easily understood in the iconography that only appear at the onset of the rainy season. The first is the one Yacovleff introduced, the *vencejo*, a small highland bird of the Andes which descends into the lower regions of the Nasca valleys during the start of spring.\textsuperscript{131} The second is the pollywog or tadpole, with its mature stage, the frog, also depicted. Both of these animals are seasonally specific creatures and may have been natural cues as to when planting should begin and attendant rituals observed.

Iconographically, the *vencejo* and tadpole motifs can be seen in direct association together, and may have elicited a predator/prey visual dialectic within the imagery. Figure 12 perfectly exemplifies this. The signifier of the AMB has several compartments which the *vencejo* fits into in a condensed visual form, with a fully formed example appearing as a terminator, the motif at the end of the tail. Inside the signifier, or body of the figure, is a line of frogs, also mirrored in the emanating element of the mouth, around which numerous tadpoles can be seen.\textsuperscript{132} The other AMB also has tadpoles and *vencejo* imagery, but this time with fish inside the signifier instead of frogs, possibly alluding to the seasonal specificity of fishing.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{130} Yacovleff 1932.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{132} The term "signifier" was appropriated by Proulx, 1968, 5, when discussing the different parts of the motifs. Signifier simply refers to the main body of a figure, excluding limbs, tails, ornaments, etc, and not to symbolic referents in which the word usually appears contextualized.
\textsuperscript{133} See Carmichael 1992.
An example which directly relates the seasonal-animal motifs with agriculture is found in Seler’s study (figure 13). Here the AMB is shown holding the digging stick/war club and a trophy head with peppers inside the signifier. Tadpoles surround the signifier and are inside the terminator, with the sprouting head motif attached to the back. This AMB in particular exemplifies a possible connection the Nasca made, visually, between cyclic seasonal phenomena and their daily lives.

This attention to seasonality may open up the possibility of a larger cosmology in terms of how the imagery is structured. The culture must have had some ordering system of their universe which they were born into, worked and died, something yet to be fully explained. While I am not positing any additional information regarding this subject, the recognition that the Nasca were aware of cyclic seasons based on animal patterns is interesting. The fact that the phenomena depicted were not simply observed things, but rather deemed important enough to be placed on the ritual polychrome vessels serves the supposition that cosmology is probably a primary symbolic guide to the images. These motifs and ceramics were disseminated by the sacred center and utilized in feasting ceremonies that were related to ensuring agricultural production.

The Nasca were indeed working with their images in far more complex ideas than has been previously understood in the literature. Music, agriculture, ritual warfare in the form of trophy head taking, and seasons all are interwoven with the AMB motif, itself a possible allusion to the elites who would have been responsible for the rites of the Nasca supernatural world. The material power of the ceramics that came from Cahuachi, the Nasca’s sacred center, can be read as political discourse that is expressed through the visual system. The images, and specifically the AMB, are not mere impersonators,
supernaturals, or communal totems, they are stylized glimpses into the Nasca’s very real social, environmental, and cultural reality. Abstracted through symbolic compression, the iconography represents real associations between ritual, pilgrimage, agriculture, warfare and life that were promoted by the discourses of the social and political elite of Cahuachi.
Concluding Remarks

Understanding images has been art history’s central project, and in my thesis I hope to continue to extend how such readings can be utilized to create a new framework. By re-investigating the unique landscape the Nasca developed, I established that utilizing highland ethnography to understand the symbolic aspects of their culture may be detrimental due to the differences. Additionally, the Nasca were socially very different from the Inca and other highland peoples, who are the dominant paradigm archaeologists use for reconstructing Andean cosmologies.

I then explored the historiography of the visual system of the Nasca to discern the different concepts that scholars used to analyze the iconography. From the beginning, the Nasca were discussed only in terms of other societies, Mesoamerica specifically. Over time, these views were deconstructed and shown to be tenuous at best, and a more Nasca, or emic-centered, view began to take shape. As scholars moved away from the Aztecs and Maya, they unfortunately still looked away from the culture itself to the highland Inca, largely because of the documentary efforts on the part of the Spanish conquerors. The ayllu kinship system is such an example of efforts to attempt to understand how the Nasca may have been socially organized through other cultural systems. However, given the ubiquity of the ayllu as a social-structural device, in both highland and costal cultures, it would not be out of the question that some proto form of the system existed.

Lastly, I critically analyzed the iconography of an important motif, the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, as a possible social actor who was responsible for ritual processes concerning the vessels, tied into cosmology of agricultural fertility catalyzed by trophy head taking. The social and cultural actor clearly shows elite
paraphernalia attached to it, most likely conveying that the motif has a high(er) status. Because of the large amount of images, some more anthropomorphized than others, the creature is probably an important figure that all Nasca would have recognized, and was probably impersonated by ritual performers. Given that the AMB is consistently shown with elite accoutrements, I would argue that it was the responsibility of the Nasca elite to enact his presence at the feasting ceremonies the polychrome vessels were used for. This motif is also shown with seasonal animals and agricultural implements, subsuming the cycles of nature within the visual system of the ceramics.

There are also additional relationships between the imagery and the site of Cahuachi through new evidence that there was centralized production of the ritual feasting vessels at the ceremonial center. Pilgrims, in the form of chief elites and other peoples wishing to gain social prestige, journeyed across the desert to take part in large rituals at the site. The elites distinguished themselves through regalia of gold repoussé mouth masks and other adornments which were also worn by a certain motifs painted on the polychrome ritual vessels – the AMB. This figure is shown in some instances as a human impersonator based on the human legs and arms, while other examples show the AMB as a more supernatural, metaphysical motif with no human characteristics and numerous zoomorphic attachments. This figure features as the most prominent figure within the Nasca’s visual system, and for whatever reason proved very useful in Cahuachi’s discursive construction, given the AMB’s prominence.

Within the AMB seasonality is shown through the attachment of animals which are seen typically at the start of the rainy season – an important annual event when Nasca farmers would have begun the planting of crops. Knowledge of the environment’s
periods is thus imprinted onto the polychrome’s two-dimensional surface. The impersonator probably utilized trophy heads in a ritual format to create the correct supernatural conditions for agricultural fertility, along with a feast for the community using the finely painted vessels for serving. The farmers, and community at large, would recognize the different animal types as signals of the changing weather conditions – a discourse on the seasons.

The elite status shown in the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being’s accoutrements is also an expression of discourse, in that it forms a rudimentary visual basis for how the Nasca socially distinguished themselves from one another. Hierarchies of relations between a single community’s members and between communities, like all cultures, had an aesthetic concerning power and its public conveyance. Individuals of higher political offices, for the ancient Nasca, utilized gold, textiles, musical instruments and large amounts of polychrome vessels in their mortuary chambers, to proclaim elite status in both the secular and supernatural worlds. This visual attention to detail, concerning elite regalia, points to an interesting cultural discourse: that felines, gold, and trophy heads constitute the material discourse on how the Nasca signaled power to each other.

All of this points to the fact that the Nasca artists’ inspiration was not entirely mundane or mystical, but a complex interaction of both. This thesis is meant to instill a new way of conceiving and interpreting the motifs of the ancient Nasca by operating under the idea of the images as discourse, and the Nasca culture as both enmeshed within symbolic constructs of its own history as well as the surrounding cultural landscape of the Andes.
Bibliography


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Figure 1: Map of the Nasca region, from Silverman 1993; Archaeologically, the ancient Nasca culture is geographically bounded to the north by the Ica River, and to the south by the Chala River.

Figure 2: Map of Cahuachi, from Silverman 1993; The grey squares are the monumental mounds mentioned in the text.
Figure 3: From Seler 1923, pg. 185, fig. 27c; The two animals streaming from the waist of the AMB are considered by Seler, to be manifestations, or holdovers, of the Mesoamerican feathered serpent: “gefiederte schlange.”

Figure 4: From Yacovleff 1932, pg. 143, fig. 12.i; AMB with five vencejos on its back.

Figure 5: From © Townsend 1985, pgs. 125/plate 7 (left) and 135/fig. 6 (right); He states that the human figures are “farmers” but clearly have more symbolism than just agricultural; the trophy heads and bloody patches on the digging sticks/war clubs signify the larger complex of warfare as necessary for agricultural production. Note the AMB to the left directly participates in this complex by holding the same digging stick/war club.
Many examples of AMBs are shown with these same implements, trophy heads and agricultural products.

Figure 6: From © Blasco and Ramos 1986, vol. 1, number 4; Early Nasca AMB effigy (ca. 250 CE).

Figure 7: From Seler 1923, pg. 194, fig. 40; AMB showing all of the typical characteristics: 1. fox-skin headdress represented by the small mound above the 2. coronet, which shows a small face in the center; 3. mouth mask that displays a face on either side of the banded mouth; bangles hang down on either side of the face with trophy heads; AMB’s right hand is holding a weapon or staff (both?); the left hand is shown holding two trophy heads.
Figure 8: From © Blasco and Ramos 1991, vol. 2, number 344; Though the image is faded, the fox-skin headdress is seen crowning the figure and draping over the back, with the pelt

Figure 9: Drawing from © Dallas Art Museum; AMB effigy drum from the Early Nasca. Note the typical iconography: coronet, mouth mask and trophy heads in hands.
Figure 10: © Christiane Clados 2003; Clados 86; Early AMB on panpipe. The triangular nature of the overall composition of the figure conforms to the shape of the panpipe.

Figure 11: © Christiane Clados; Clados 96; Another example of an AMB on a panpipe.

Figure 12: From © Proulx 2006, pg. 110, fig. 5.104; AMB shown holding a bifurcated figure with a possible panpipe in between the halves
Figure 13: From © Proulx 2006, pg. 9, fig. 1.6; Ritual performance scene with an elite/ritual personage (because of scale hierarchy relative to other figures, presence of the spondylus shell necklace, as well as possessing more costume, in general, than the others) with panpipes. Note the formal similarities between the panpipes on the costume of the central figure, and the central figure’s left hand.

Figure 14: From Seler 1923, pg. 190, fig. 34; Two Paracas (ca. 200 BCE – 100 CE) examples of AMBs holding beans. Note that the major iconographic indicators – coronet, bangles and mouth mask – are present here, showing the AMB’s incredible weathering of time, space and cultural diffusion.

Figure 15: From Seler 1923, pg. 191, fig. 35; AMB (modified) with sprouting head motif on back.
Figure 16: From © Blasco and Ramos 1985, pg. 236, number 190; AMB with numerous agricultural products: peppers along the back and added to the coronet, maize is held in both hands, and the terminator is a local fruit (from Sawyer 1979; see fig. 26 for identification of the agricultural iconography).

Figure 17: From © Conlee 2007, pg. 442; Front and back of head jar.
Figure 18: From © Sawyer 1979, see fig. 17; “Farmer” type at left, and a “warrior” type at right, with digging sticks/war clubs and agricultural materials (maize, beans and tubers). Note the high degree of similarities between the two figures, and that each figure’s’ head represents a trophy head. The “farmer” has two tassels from the chin which are iconographic markers of the carrying cord used to attach trophy heads to belts and other costume items for public viewing and social prestige. “Farmers” are frequently painted with the digging sticks/war clubs as well, furthering the symbolic conflation of these two motifs.

Figure 19: © Clados 193; AMB with a vincejos that are located in four places: 1. fully visualized at the end of the AMB’s tail, 2. visually abbreviated eleven times attached directly to the signifier, 3. with one that is detached and floating at the bottom of the tail, 4. and the remaining two underneath the streamer emanating from the mouth with three frogs. Note the frogs both in the mouth streamer as well as inside the signifier.
Figure 20: From Seler 1923; AMB with tadpoles and peppers in the signifier and growing from the sprouting heads motif. The AMB hold the digging stick/war club in the right hand.