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The Huaca Pintada of Illimo

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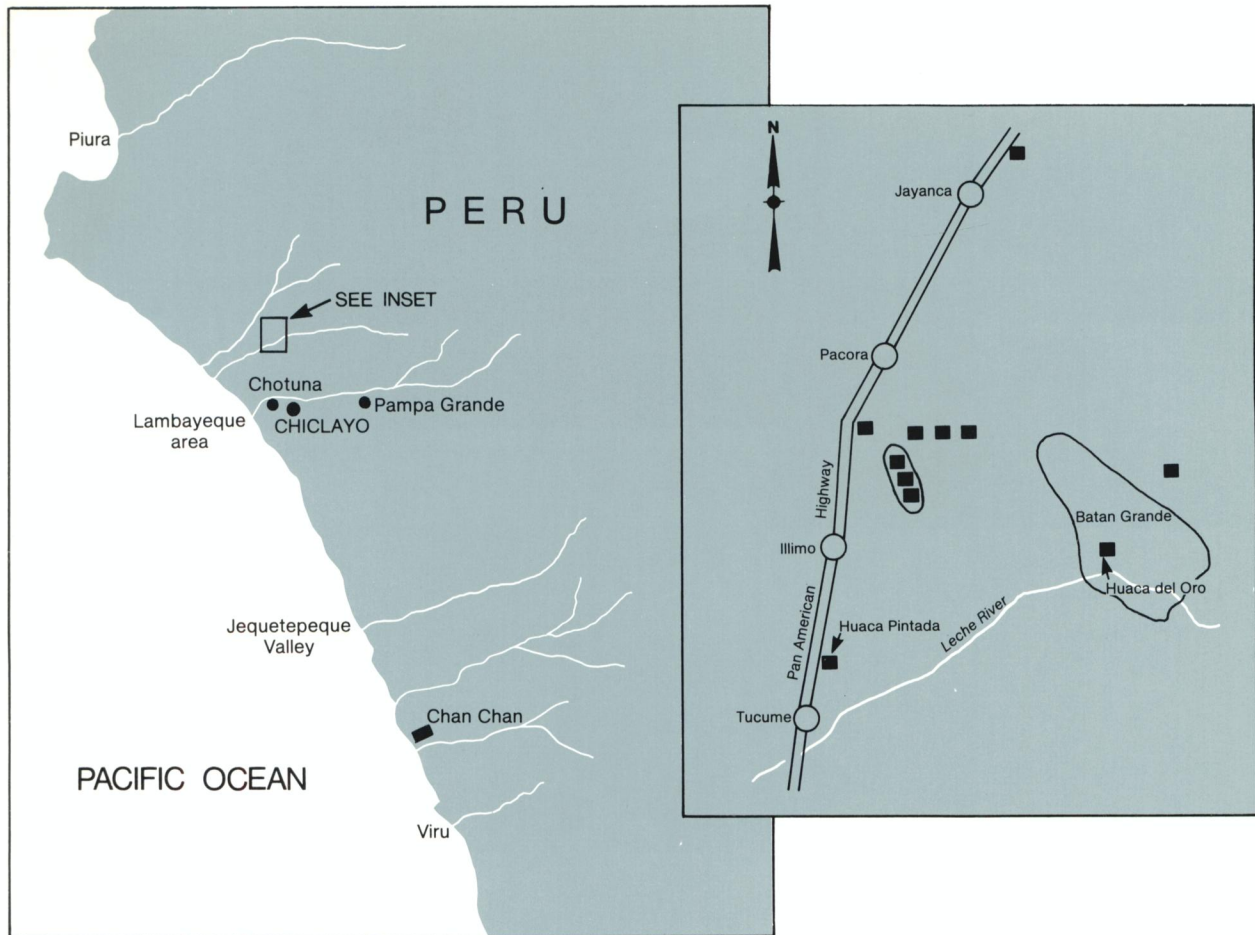
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# The Huaca Pintada of Illimo

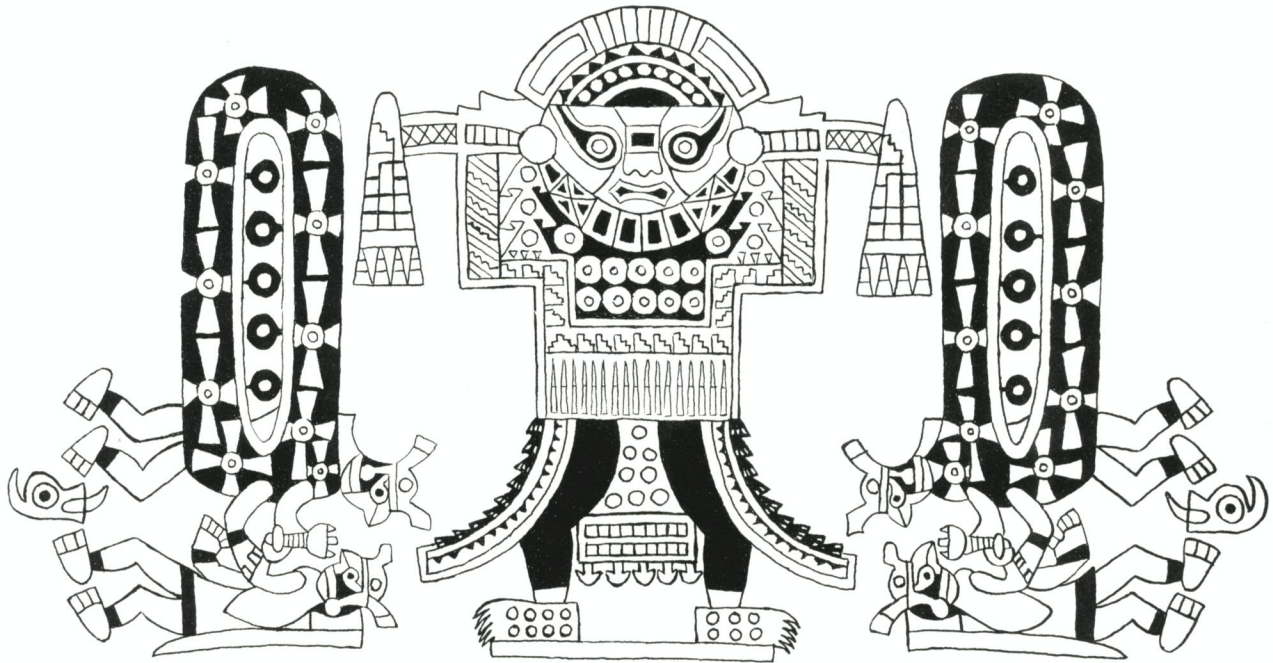
By RICHARD P. SCHAEDEL

**A**bout twenty-five miles north of the modern city of Chiclayo near the tiny hamlet of Illimo on Peru's arid north coast rises a small pyramidal mound which the natives call the Huaca Pintada or the painted

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temple. Local legend maintains that this structure was erected long before the reign of the sun-worshipping Inca people. These crumbling remains are said to be remnants of a holy sanctuary dedicated to the moon, the rivers, the rains, the lizards and spiders. As the story goes, the temple walls originally bore neither paintings nor other decorations on the inside or exterior. One night the priest Anto Tunpa dreamt that the sun came close to him and



*Carrion-Cachot frieze from Huaca Pintada. All drawings and color reconstructions by Marilyn Harper.*

burned the temple. The old man ignored this celestial warning and continued to repeat his vows to the moon, the waters and the animals. One morning soon after, Tunpa awoke to find the outside of the temple painted blazing red, while inside the walls were decorated in red, blue and yellow—the colors of the sun, the sky and of glistening gold. Tunpa himself felt the imprint of the celestial body and fell over dead from the heat. On his face lay a mask of gold.

In 1938 Augusto León-Barandiarán, a Peruvian folklorist, published this mythological account. He associated the story with the discovery at the beginning of the twentieth century of a gold mask in a temple which had painted walls. León-Barandiarán interpreted the mask as Anto Tunpa's punishment for refusing to establish the sun cult of the Incas. He also saw it as a sure warning of the forthcoming triumph of these conquerors from Cuzco. But the mystery of the Huaca Pintada of Illimo started before León-Barandiarán's popularization. In 1917, Enrique Brüning, a German scholar who had lived in Peru since 1875, published a short article describing many of the largest ruins in the Chiclayo-Lambayeque area surrounding Illimo and made a brief reference to some murals supposedly found in this huaca. Twenty years later, the North American archaeologist Wendell

C. Bennett, on a mission sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History, carried out the first scientific excavations in the area. Although Bennett excavated in the Huaca Pintada, he found no traces of murals. In Chiclayo, however, he discovered a summary of an earlier newspaper account by a Señor Orrego describing the wall painting referred to by Brüning in 1917. Bennett republished the sparse Orrego description in his *Excavations of the North Coast of Peru* because it so clearly indicated the existence of murals in the prehistoric architecture of the area. Since then three related wall paintings have been reported from this area: in 1940, Rebecca Carrión Cachot, former director of the National Archaeology Museum in Lima, reported another painting from the Huaca Pintada itself; I uncovered another wall painting in 1951 at Huaca del Oro of the Batan Grande group; and the late James Ford of the American Museum of Natural History uncovered a third painting in 1959 in a pyramid which he called Facho. The exact location of Huaca Facho and its frieze is not known. Ford gave its position as five-six kilometers northwest of Batan Grande, one of the main ceremonial centers of the north coast. The problem of its location is complicated by the existence of a mound northeast of Batan Grande which is also commonly called Facho.

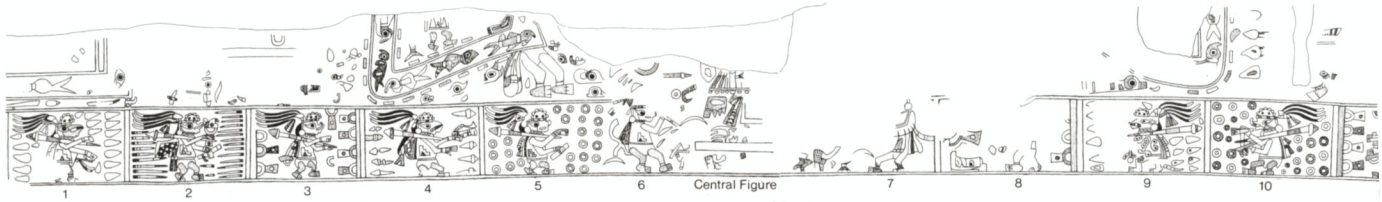
In the summer of 1976, supported by a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service, I spent three months studying the Brüning papers, field notes and photographs which were left in 1928 to the Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde. I discovered the black and white photographs of the frieze described by Orrego, taken by Enrique Brüning in 1916, shortly before he wrote his article. Brüning himself gave a short description of the frieze in his field notes, specifying the colors of the mural, thereby making a color reconstruction possible. It is clear that the Brüning frieze is the one described by Orrego and almost surely also is the painted huaca from which Léon-Barandiarán's myth was derived. Among the Brüning papers in Hamburg, I found Orrego's original description, dated May 25, 1916, on the front page of the Chiclayo newspaper from which he made the summary later published in 1927. Orrego's account provided additional information which could only be surmised in Léon-Barandiarán's myth: the huaca was referred to as "Pintada" as far back as the nineteenth century by the ancestors of the then eighty-year-old (in 1916) Marcelo Granados, owner of the property on which the huaca was located. Furthermore, the property was in indigenous lines of inheritance and formed a boundary marker between two Indian communities probably based on settlement demarcations dating to colonial times (ca. 1530-1820).

Brüning, who was sixty-eight years old at the time he photographed his frieze, returned to Germany in 1925, taking with him a large archive of photographs, the earliest of which date from 1889. He gave about two hundred to the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde prior to his death in 1928, and the approximately two thousand remaining photographs were transferred to Hamburg as a legacy by his heirs. Most of the negatives were numbered and catalogued, but in later years Brüning discontinued this practice. The pictures of the Huaca Pintada were found randomly distributed with small groups of other photographs taken after 1915. One wonders why Brüning remained silent about the Huaca Pintada except for his brief account in the 1917 article. Additionally, there seem to have been other photographs of this frieze—one of them was reproduced on the front of a postcard in English—and Orrego refers to a picture which was supposed to have been printed in the original newspaper account.

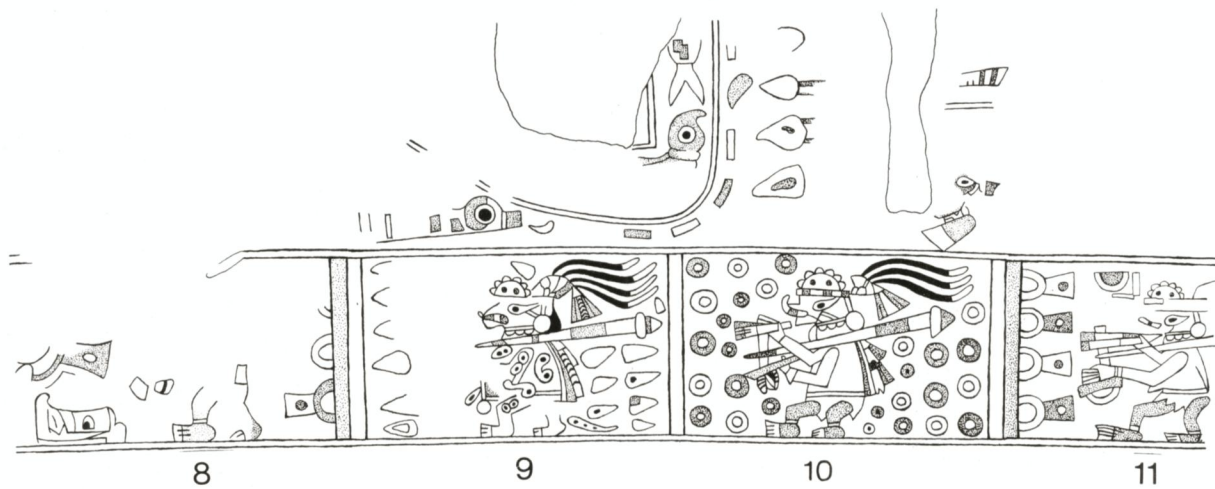
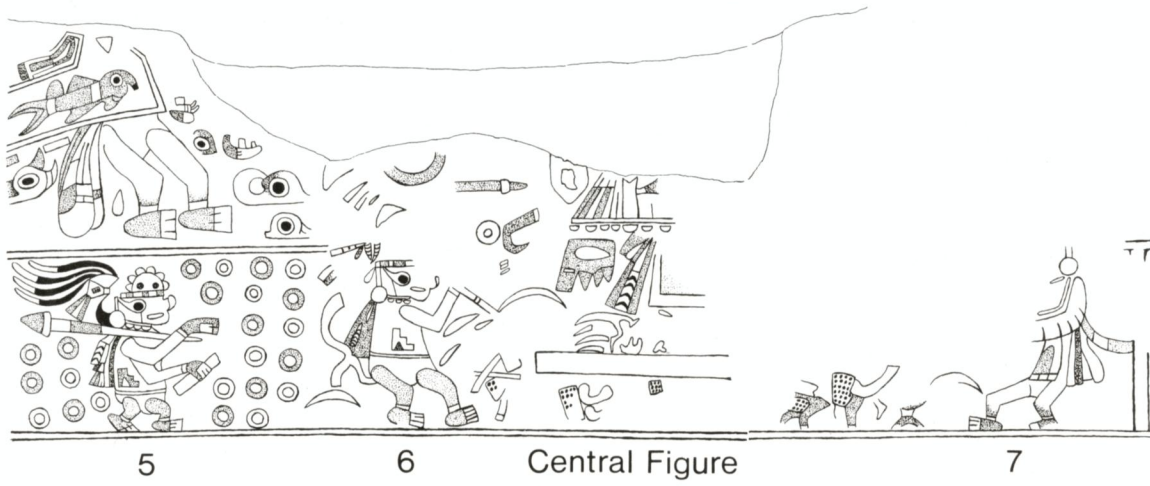
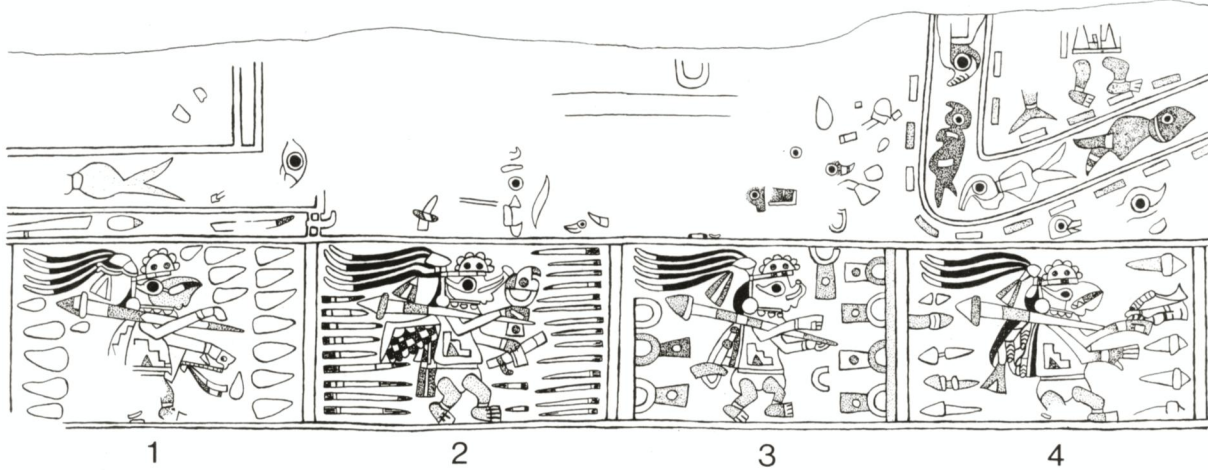
Perhaps Brüning felt that Orrego or others would eventually publish the documentation and when he selected the photographs to give to Berlin, he apparently forgot about the group from the Huaca Pintada. Why Brüning's papers remained in oblivion for nearly forty years is almost an equally great riddle. To begin to remedy this situation, I enlisted the aid of one of my former students, Marilyn Harper, to reconstruct the Brüning frieze from the negatives, contact prints and the postcard. These materials, together with information from Orrego's original description and Brüning's field notes, have allowed us to resurrect this precious example of North Coast Peruvian monumental art.

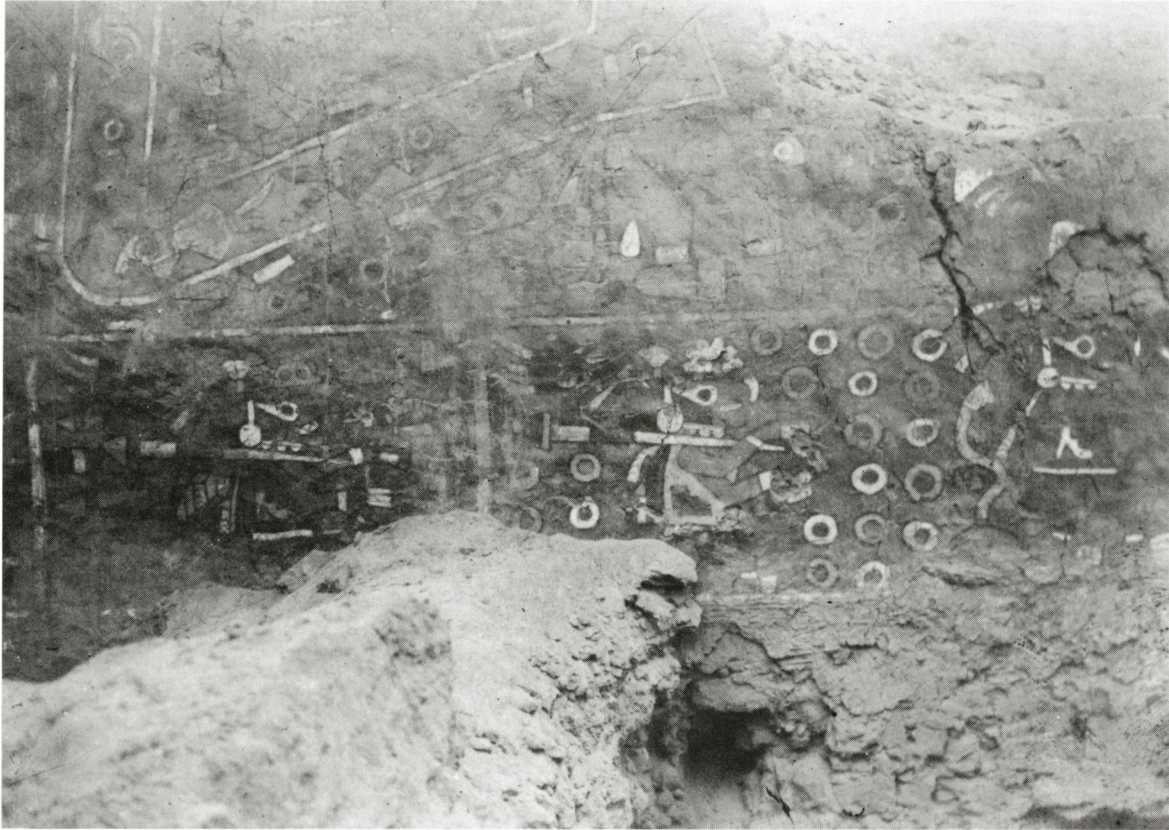
In the Brüning frieze, the remains of a clawed or webbed foot are discernible, as well as the lower hems of a mantle from a large front-face figure. This feature is analogous to the central figure of the Peruvian frieze which was reconstructed by Rebecca Carrión Cachot in 1940. Her drawing was allegedly copied from a portion of the Huaca Pintada sometime between 1937 and 1939. The possibility that the Carrión drawing was an imaginative reconstruction of the original destroyed central figure in the Brüning frieze cannot be absolutely discarded. Carrión, referring to her frieze in 1939, indicated that it had been uncovered recently. This seems confusing since Bennett had excavated the site in 1937 and found no trace of *any* frieze. The explanation that best fits all the facts is that the frieze upon which Carrión based her drawing was uncovered clandestinely *after* Bennett's dig. This other mural probably corresponds to an extant wall surface, presumably external, large enough to provide space for it.

The photographed remains of the frieze at Huaca Pintada found and documented by Brüning consist of a central figure, eleven impaneled processional figures and assorted elements located above the level of the panels. The central figure is represented by a clawed left foot, portions of costume and trappings, and an elevated platform on which the figure stands. Several partially preserved design elements can be discerned immediately to the left and right and below this platform, but they cannot be clearly identified. Especially noticeable are white painted blocks resembling dominoes, bearing rows of dots.

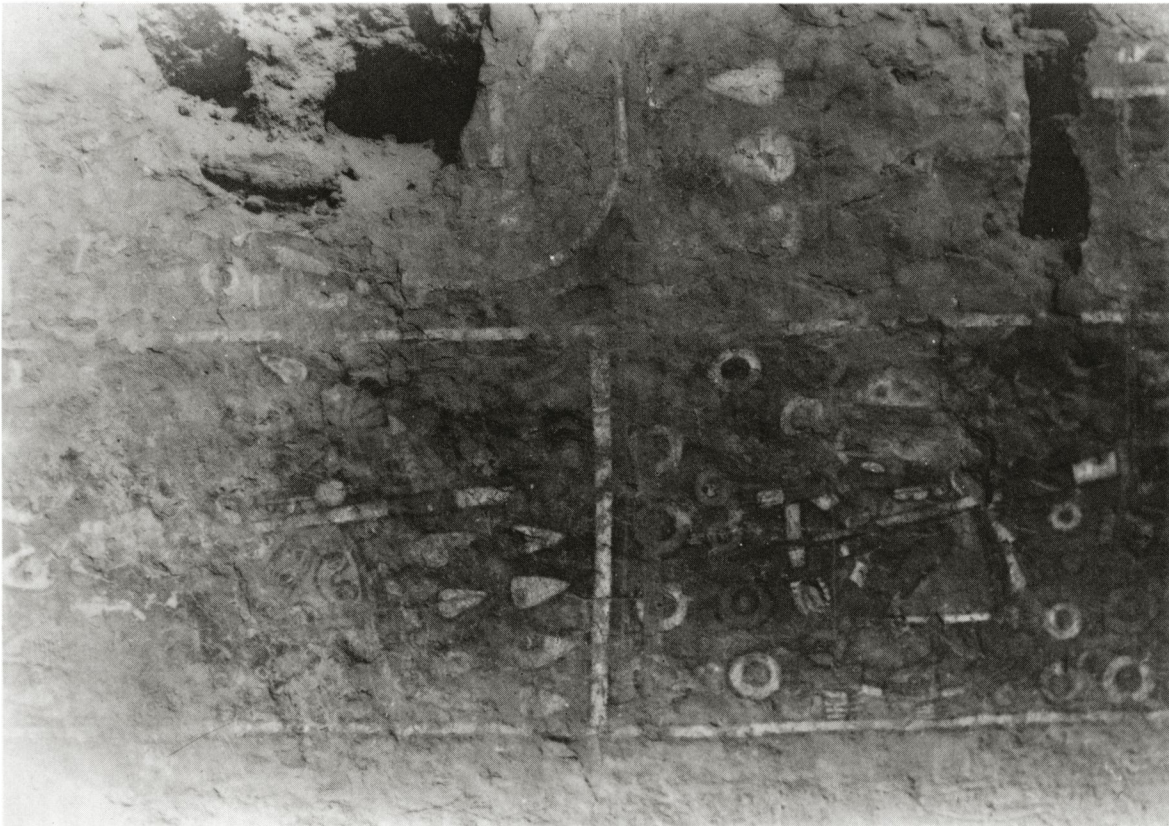


Panorama reconstruction of Huaca Pintada frieze, drawn from Brüning's photographs.





*Photograph of undulating band above panels 4 and 5 on left side of Huaca Pintada frieze, enlarged from Brüning's negatives.*



*Photograph of panels 9 and 10 on right side of Huaca Pintada frieze.*



*Color reconstruction of panel 2 of Huaca Pintada frieze.*



*Color reconstruction of panel 10 of Huaca Pintada frieze.*

The left side of the frieze consists of six processional figures seen in profile facing the central area. The four outermost figures are framed in rectangular panels bordered with white paint outlined in black; the fifth figure is not bordered on the proximal side. The sixth figure differs in several respects from the others. For one thing, he is larger, judging from his headdress which rises above the level of the panels, and he carries no mace over his shoulder like the other figures, nor does he wear black feathers trailing behind his helmet. The tail-like appendage behind his body suggests the loop characteristically seen in Mochica art which was used by runners to attach ceremonial wings. The right side of the frieze contains five profiled figures also facing the central area. None of Brüning's photographs extend far enough to the right to show the outermost border of the panel designated II, but it is clear that the right hand figures are impaneled in the same manner as the figures in the left half. Some parts of the frieze itself are poorly preserved: one figure (8) consists of little more than a pair of feet facing left and scant remains of borders. The two figures flanking the central figure correspond to each other, since both are somewhat larger than the other warriors and their arm depiction and costume differ from those of all the other figures.

The most striking features of the uppermost levels of the mural are the two ribbon-like elements which can be seen above the panels designated 4 and 5 on the left and 9 on the right. Seven partial or complete bird and fish designs appear inside the borders of these ribbons. The anthropomorphic feet and feathered tail of a large figure are seen below the terminus of the left-hand ribbon, while the feet and lower clothing of a smaller figure appear in the angle formed by the sharp bend of the ribbon. The corresponding areas on the right side of the frieze were not preserved. One treatment which is the same for both ribbons, however, lies in the rows of painted "bricks" of alternating colors which parallel the ribbon borders. Other elements found in the upper parts of the mural include bird heads, at least one feline head, two fish tails, *strombus* shells, and numerous small, unidentified objects. Although the two halves of the frieze are not mirror images, most of the same elements are found on both sides. Among these are the maces carried by the processional figures, their ear ornaments

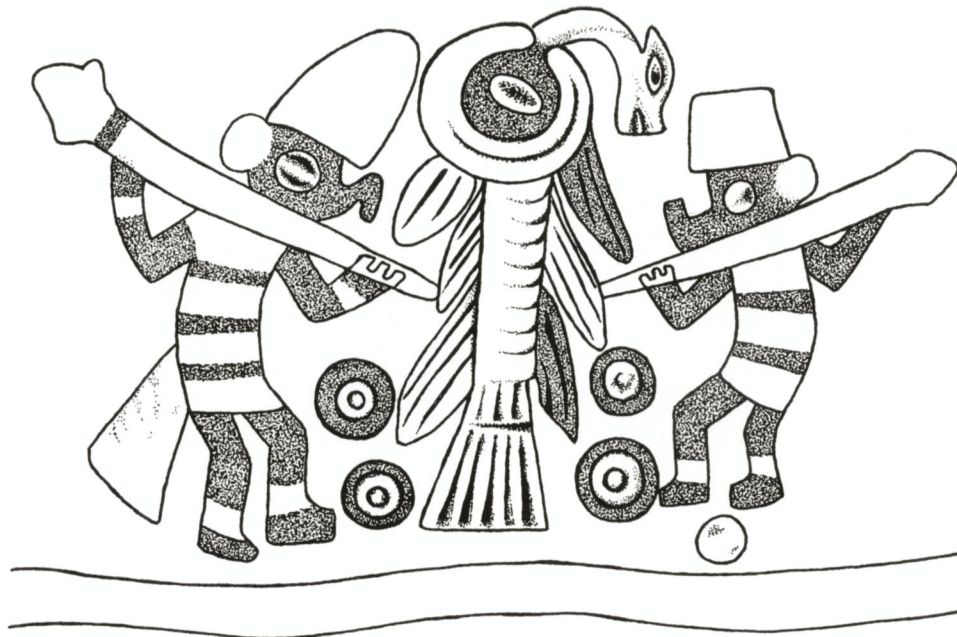
or protectors, necklaces, helmets, and stepped icon designs on the jackets. Likewise, most of the decorative space-fillers used in the panels are found on both sides of the frieze, except for the darts in the second panel and the small weapons or mace-heads of the fourth.

The old postcard found among Brüning's negatives and prints pictures a man with mestizo features standing in front of the central part of the frieze. Assuming that this man had the average height of about 5'8", it was possible to calculate the dimensions of the various parts of the frieze. The panels must have been about eighty centimeters high and 130 centimeters long, excluding their borders, in which the horizontal lines appear to have been about three centimeters high and the vertical white borders five centimeters wide. The photographs are weakest in the area immediately to the right of the central figure. Brüning noted a length of 515 centimeters for the central portion of the frieze, which presumably included figures 5, 6 and 7 which were not enclosed by conventional panels. Measurements made from those photographs showing this part of the frieze add up to a total of 485 centimeters. The six percent difference from Brüning's overall measurement indicates that our reconstruction of the central area is fairly accurate. The total length of the frieze as deduced from Brüning's photographs is about 15.5 meters.

Brüning noted that the colors used at the Huaca Pintada were black, white, yellow, red and blue. The last three hues he identified in his notes as yellow m/m 4, red between 128-124, and blue m/n 164. Unfortunately, these notations do not correspond to any locatable system of color identification such as the standard Munsell Color Chart used by archaeologists. However, by comparing them with the analysis of pigments from Huaca Facho, it can be assumed that the red comes from cinnabar and the yellow from hydrated iron oxides, which yield the color called yellow ochre. Iron red (hematite) and orpiment yellow (arsenic trisulfide) pigments have also been reported from other Peruvian murals in 1974 by Duccio Bonavia of the Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia in Lima. The white is undoubtedly calcium carbonate with traces of iron impurities which give it a creamy appearance. The black pigment could be pyrolusite which was found at Huaca Facho or merely black iron oxide.

The blue pigment, however, remains a





*Scene on pot  
from Viru,  
showing men  
spearing a  
large fish.*

mystery. Brüning noted that the background of the Pintada mural was painted red and that the legs of the warriors were yellow. The black and white pigments, because of their starkness, were clear in the photographs. This left only certain areas of a very light shade which could possibly be the blue parts of the painting. It is not known whether this was a pale blue pigment to begin with, or a darker shade of blue which had faded or deteriorated. No corresponding pigment was recorded for the Facho mural. Although spectrographic analysis of a blue-gray pigment from Illimo was reported by Bonavia in 1974, the tests no more than rule out copper-blue compounds.

**D**espite many unresolved questions about the Huaca Pintada, it is clear that these paintings represent one of the most complete painted murals found on the Peruvian north coast, and so far, the one located farthest north. It remains to be discovered, however, when the mural was painted, who painted it and what the various elements signified. Until field work can secure reliable evidence for dating, one must rely on iconographic analogies in order to place the mural in a specific cultural period. I believe that this mural should be attributed to the earliest phase of the Middle Horizon period or A.D. 600-750. The overall composition suggests the

symmetry characteristic of this period which is so well known from the Sun-Gate at Tiahuanaco. There, a front-faced central figure with profile running figures moving into it from right and left is carved on stone. The detailed iconography on the Huaca Pintada mural, however, suggests regional derivations. The central figure, with its clawed or webbed feet and tunic-like tasseled garment, strongly resembles another frieze found at nearby Huaca del Oro, which is well within the "Lambayeque" art style and is so far dated no earlier than the Middle Horizon period. The Huaca Pintada side figures, however, suggest strains of the Mochica style, variously defined by scholars as a component of Moche V, Mochicoid, Decadent Mochica or Mochica-Lambayeque which was first illustrated by John H. Rowe of the University of California at Berkeley in 1942 in pottery from Piura.

The closest analogues to this stylistic strain are found in some polychrome pots, photographed from collections and assembled by Christopher Donnan, Director of the Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, and Alan Sawyer of the University of British Columbia. These vessels are generally lumped together with Mochica, since that is where their closest prehistoric iconographic roots lie. Yet it is possible that this strain is really a style unto itself, probably deriving from a localized base in the area between the Jequetepeque and Piura valleys,

*Fragment of low-relief  
frieze discovered at  
Huaca Chotuna by author.*

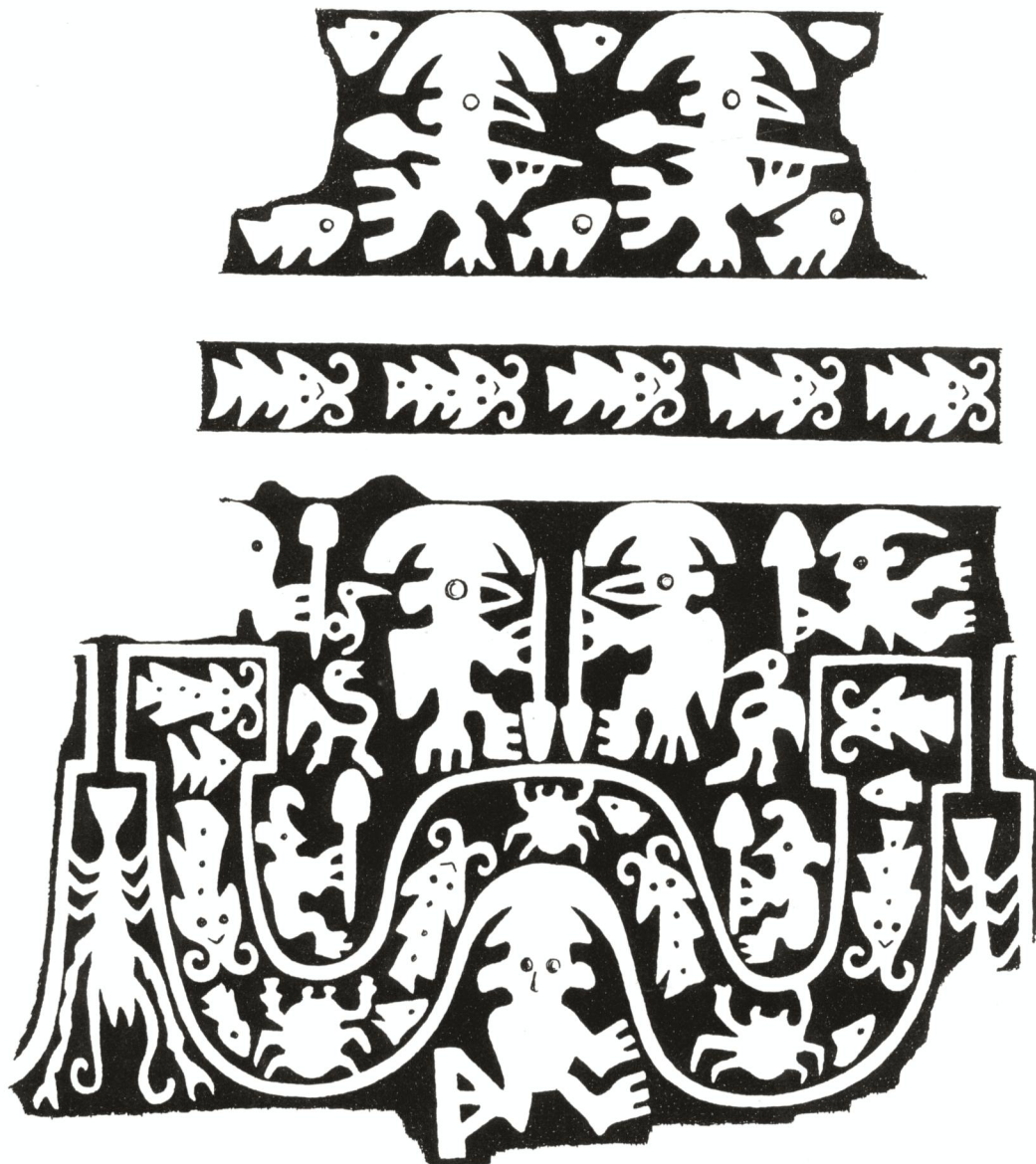


north of the heartland of Mochica. The Pintada frieze, therefore, with its iconographic similarities to Mochica art, should be dated chronologically to about A.D. 600-700; it presumably represents either a parallel structural development during the final phases of Mochica culture which flourished in the adjacent valley to the south in Lambayeque at Pampa Grande, or it may represent an immediately post-Mochica cultural trend. In this case, ideological rather than structural change was being emphasized, in which old Mochica thematic symbols were being subordinated by a new cosmic deity.

Dating the murals, however, hardly explains what meaning the Huaca Pintada may have held for its creators. On first view, Brüning and Orrego both thought that the mural represented warriors and combat. As an afterthought, Brüning conceived of a maritime theme and mentioned a balsa or reed boat as a possible explanation for the curved, ribbon-like motif that seemed to be almost symmetrically draped over the bottom row of processional figures. The likelihood of warriors as a central theme recedes, however, on closer examination of the details. Arms bearers are obviously visible in the lower panels, but it is not clear if these arms were for warfare or hunting; it is also unclear whether the object of the hunt was terrestrial, littoral or aerial. A later Middle Horizon pot from Viru, a lower north coast valley, shows similar warriors

spearing a large fish or sea mammal. They use the same mace-like implement as the figures in the Brüning frieze. Within the panels of the Pintada frieze, two of the motifs seem to represent detachable pieces of the mace: the narrow, dart-like point and the more bluntly pointed knob from the other end. A third motif appears to represent a semi-lunar object—whether it is discoidal or hemispherical is not clear—which has a thong with a perforated hole. Although the function of this object is unknown, it can be generally classified as representing “gear.” But the fact that figure 2 appears to be holding it and that what may be a bird’s head projects from it, complicates matters. The alternate hypothesis that this hemisphere represents a “cup” seems even less promising. The only other icons inside the panels, except for the warriors and their garb, are “rings,” which could be either detachable spear-point guards or clubheads. They are analogous to the omnipresent “bagels,” known to the antiquity of Old and New World alike, which have also been interpreted as net and digging-stick weights. In a stylistic sense, these designs are homologous with the “gooseflesh” filler element so prevalent in Middle Horizon pressed-ware pottery. As such, they may have an environmental glyph-like significance (possibly astral, e.g., star-studded sky) which remains to be decoded.

The upper portion of the frieze, consisting of



*Aquatic frieze at the Velarde compound at Chan Chan. After, Luis Miró Quesada, "Apreciaciones urbanísticas y arquitectónicas sobre la metropoli de Chan Chan," Amaru 4(1967):51-61.*

the undulating ribbon motif enclosing fish and bird-like forms, can best be compared to both Mochica and Chimu designs representing either water channels or watercraft. Thus, the central figure may represent the god or goddess of the sea or moon. According to the Peruvian ethnohistorian Maria Rostworowski de Diez Canseco who has reconstructed this presumed deity from a Central Coast myth, this goddess was represented iconographically by interlocking

volutes as wave symbols, rings as possible spray symbols, and bird appendages. These elements usually appear in the area surrounding the goddess; the characteristics of the figure itself are ornithomorphic, consisting of webbed feet and plumage. As an alternative, Carrión has suggested that the central figure of the Huaca Pintada frieze could be identified as the moon goddess. However one might reconstruct the central figure, nothing conclusively contradicts

a littoral, aquatic composition. The anthropomorphic figures wear masks and seem to carry gear associated with the procurement of marine or riverine prey whether fish or fowl, and the central figure appears to symbolize the recipient deity; the filler elements and the upper sections exclusive of the deity similarly represent a water-life motif.

**T**he closest counterparts to the Pintada frieze are later low reliefs dating from the end of the Middle Horizon period. Earliest in time, though not necessarily closest iconographically, are a few fragmentary carved panels found at Chotuna, in nearby Lambayeque, and Huaca El Dragon in the Moche valley some hundred miles to the south. In both temples, the principal central figure is missing, but the maritime, avian and nonterrestrial aspects of the environment and the processional profile figures are roughly analogous. Excavation of the Huaca El Dragon revealed that it was once a depository for *strombus* and *spondyllus* shells which were reworked at the site into inlay for ceremonial wooden idols. The iconography of the Dragon reliefs is infinitely more complex and quite likely represents calendrical ordering and a wider cosmogony-pantheon than the more fragmentary Brüning frieze. No artifacts which would reveal any specific function have been recovered from the smaller temple of the Huaca Chotuna complex. The latest example dating to late prehispanic times of an analogous aquatic frieze is also a low-relief done in the "champléve" technique on the walls of the Velarde compound, one of the eleven citadels of Chan Chan in Peru. In this case, the wavy band motif enclosing aquatic forms is closer to the overall design in the Brüning frieze as are the beak-masked anthropomorphs who form the procession. A repetitive front-faced central figure flanked by two beak-masked staff-bearers also correspond generally to the central portion of the Huaca Pintada mural.

However spotty this view of North Coast mural decoration with maritime iconography might appear, it is clear that a religious continuum existed from about A.D. 500 through 1500, a fact consistently supported by the sparse ethnohistoric record. Throughout this period, the North Coast people, however tribalized into shifting polities, were ethnically homogeneous.

Part of that common ethnic heritage was a shared dependence on maritime ecosystems and a shared reverence for the perceived deities who guaranteed their equilibrium. It is not surprising that they would resent the imposition of a sun-worshipping religion which was introduced by the Inca highlanders. What we rather dimly perceive in this chronological array of murals from the Mochica region of the Peruvian north coast, rather than a succession of distinct cultural expressions, is a basic pattern expressed in various media and with different emphases, altered by the technology and the internal socio-political changes of a millennium.

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FOR FURTHER READING: Wendell C. Bennett, "Archaeology of the North Coast of Peru: An Account of Exploration and Excavation in Viru and Lambayeque Valleys," *Anthropological Papers*, volume 37, part I, American Museum of Natural History (New York 1939); Duccio Bonavia, *Ricchata Quellccani. Pinturas mureles prehispanicas* (Lima 1974), a comprehensive look at Peruvian polychrome murals, including the three discussed in this article; Enrique (Hans Heinrich) Brüning, "Provincia de Lambayeque: contribucion arqueologica," *Boletin de la sociedad geografica de Lima* 32 (1917): 197-201; Rebecca Carrión Cachot, "La luna y su personificacion ornitomorfa en el arte Chimú," *XXVII Congreso Internacional de Americanistas* 2 (Lima 1940): 571-587; Christopher B. Donnan, "Mochica-Huari murals from Northern Peru," *ARCHAEOLOGY* 2 (1972): 85-95, a publication of the Facho murals found by James Ford, and Donnan, *Mochica Art and Iconography* (Los Angeles 1976), an attempt to decode Mochica iconography; Augusto D. León-Barandiarán, *Mitos leyendas y tradiciones lambayecanas* (Lima 1938), publication of the Huaca Pintada myth; Maria Rostworowski de Diez Canseco, "Urpayhuachac y el 'Simbolo del Mar'," *Arqueologia Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru* 14 (1973); John Howland Rowe, "A New Pottery Style from the Department of Piura, Peru," *Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology* 1 (1942): 30-34; Richard P. Schaedel, "Major Ceremonial and Population Centers in Northern Peru," *Proceedings of the Twenty-ninth Congress of Americanista* 1 (1951): 232-243; "Highlights of Andean Archaeology," *ARCHAEOLOGY* 2 (1957): 93-99; "The Huaca el Dragon," *Journal de la Societe des Americanistes* 2 (1966): 383-496.