

The

ATLATL

“Too long have I hunted mammoth alone!”

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Atlatl Use on Moche Pottery of Ancient Peru.

By John Whittaker

The Moche civilization developed along a 550 kilometer strip of the dry coast of northern Peru between AD 100 and 800. Farmers produced corn, beans, squash, chili, peanuts, avocados, and guava. Domesticated llamas, guinea pigs, and ducks, as well as fish and shellfish from the sea and rivers provided animal protein. The system supported a large population with a complex hierarchy of elite priests and rulers, who oversaw the construction of massive adobe pyramids and orderly cities. Extraordinarily skillful artisans worked in gold, silver, and copper, shell and turquoise, weaving cotton and llama wool, and creating the elaborate pottery that is the most familiar part of Moche culture.

Moche culture was as brilliant and vicious as that of the Aztec. The pottery, typically stirrup jars, depicts homely life, elite ritual, individual portraits, medical problems, local animals, birds, and sea life, and famously erotic scenes. There are also numerous scenes of bloody battle, human sacrifice, and supernatural creatures that blend human bodies with crab claws, fish tails, sea urchin spines, and animal heads with large sharp teeth. Snarling deities are often shown cutting off heads with spade-shaped copper knives. It was not good to be a Moche alone after dark.

Two finely illustrated books display some of the best of Moche pottery:



Donnan, Christopher B.

2004 Moche Portraits from Ancient Peru. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Donnan, Christopher B. and Donna McClelland

1999 Moche Fineline Painting: Its Evolution and Its Artists. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.

Both books have an art history orientation. They discuss the chronological development of Moche art styles, and focus on how things were depicted, rather than on what they mean. Unfortunately, most of the Moche pottery we have today was looted without record by early explorers and local grave-robbers, so many important archaeological questions remain unanswered. The portraits on stirrup jars show that some important people were depicted at different points in their life spans, sometimes as both warriors and captives, and because most were made in molds and then individually finished, similar images could have been widely distributed. The fineline painting on pottery also goes through distinctive phases of development, and here the authors believe they can identify individual artists, each responsible for several different pots. A number of stock scenes and motifs appear again and again, and give some idea of what was considered appropriate and important to paint on pots.



The authors are curiously silent on the subject of atlatls, although atlatls are prominent in some of the commonly shown scenes, and differences in how they are drawn could be used to distinguish individual artists just as well as details of hands or clothing. The atlatls are the distinctive Peruvian style, a shortish rod with an attached hook, and a hook-like decorative projection at the handle. This is often shown in the form of a bird head, and there are actual Peruvian specimens with such ornaments. The darts appear to be unfletched, although in one case fletching may be indicated. They can have either plain or barbed points. I see three main contexts in which atlatls appear: warfare and warrior depictions, hunting, and ritual.

As in many cultures, warfare helped to define the elite members of society, sustain and symbolize their power, elevate their prestige, and pass their time. Although the images in the books are not a statistical sample, it is evident that themes of war, warriors, and weapons make up a large portion of the paintings, and ritual and hunting depictions are also symbolically related to war. If you weren't willing to knock heads, quite literally, you would not have gotten far in the Moche world. The weapon of choice was the mace, which appears in almost all



weapon bundles, carried by almost all warriors, and used with gusto in virtually every scene of battle. Atlatls are carried by only a minority of warriors, and while maces cracking skulls are everywhere, I found only one really good depiction of atlatl battle. At one end of a long scene, a warrior with a mace faces another who holds a mace in one hand, and an atlatl, dart nocked, in the other. Elsewhere in the scene, a warrior falls, speared from behind,

while his opponent approaches to club him, brandishing the atlatl in the other hand, and another is about to finish him off with a mace from in front. Deer hunt scenes often have a similar format.

Weapon bundles and the gear held by warriors always includes shields and maces, often slings and darts, but only sometimes an atlatl. It may be of course that atlatls were more important in warfare than shown, just as swords and individual combat got the glory in medieval times, while archers often won the battles. However, the goal of Moche warfare was mostly to capture valiant enemies for sacrifice.

Battle scenes form only a part of what the authors call the "Warrior Narrative," a sort of comic-book story that convinced me not to become a Moche. Winners of course are glorified, but I felt more sympathy with the losers, since the Moche rulers were even less troubled by Geneva Convention moral issues than any of our current world leaders. If your brains were not dashed out on the field, further scenes in the Narrative show that your captor tied a rope around your neck, punched you in the face with his mace so your nose spouted blood, and dragged you off to face an unarmed but well decorated priest or ruler, who consigned you to the next comic book, the "Sacrifice Ceremony." The sacrifice depictions don't involve atlatls, but feature lots of aggrieved looking captives being manhandled by the victors in a shower of blood drops, and a priest or deity being presented with a goblet. Given the fondness for sprays of gore and decapitation or throat-slitting scenes, we suspect the beverage was not tomato juice. Archaeological evidence has confirmed these depictions of human sacrifice, blood-sipping priests, and final dismemberment of the victims.



The deer hunting scenes are so similar to some of the battle scenes that they are probably symbolically related. Although maces are shown in use, especially to finish a wounded deer, the deer is usually shown pierced by darts, and sometimes the hunter is shown with his atlatl. As in warfare, he usually carries two or three spare darts.

Ritual depictions include not only the Sacrifice Ceremony, but also what the authors mislabel "Ceremonial Badminton." Badminton is a poor analogy to describe pictures that show some kind of ritualized competition or game using atlatls. In the several versions shown, the participants usually have animal or bird heads, and there are usually

racks of darts and round jars of drink or food. The participants are shown with darts ready to throw, and selecting darts from the rack, and the darts themselves have bars or crosses not far from both ends, unlike those used in hunting or war scenes. Loose darts and some of those in use also have what appear to be flowers attached, perhaps a target successfully struck. The repeated supernatural elements show that this event has more significance than the average ISAC.

Although I wish more attention had been paid to interpreting Moche culture, (and especially giving atlatls the emphasis any WAA



member knows they deserve), these are both gorgeous and fascinating books for anyone interested in the Moche or some of the world's most dramatic prehistoric art.

(The illustrations are all from Moche Finesline Painting).
