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Research Article

# 'Children of the Thunderbolt': divine leadership in the Central Andes before the Incas

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This study examines ancient Andean developments involving art and leadership, specifically among groups of the Recuay cultural tradition (cal AD 100–700) of Peru's North-Central Highlands. We detail new archaeological discoveries at the hilltop center of Pashash (Pallasca Province, Ancash Department), the seat of an important Recuay polity emerging by the third century AD. Based on ethnohistorical comparisons and the imagery of elaborate materials (e.g. carved monoliths, metalwork, ceramics), we contend that special Recuay leaders were apotheosized into ancestral divinities and given iconographic associations to storm gods. The visual associations appear to regard key persons – ancestors and heads of kin groups – as 'hijos del Rayo,' the privileged offspring of apical thunder-lightning storm divinities prominent in the high Andes during historical times. The case helps to (1) evidence early takeup of storm god ideology and highland segmentary political organization known principally for later prehistory and colonial times; and (2) mark an instance of divinely-sanctioned rulership long before the Incas.

**Keywords:** Recuay culture; Pashash; Pre-Columbian art; sacred kingship; divine rulership; ancestors; segmentary societies; dynastic reckoning

If all kingship is sacred (Michalowski 2008, 33; Sahlins 2017), how and when is it that some rulers come to be seen as divine, that is, as ontologically different from the rest of society? This essay centers on this question,

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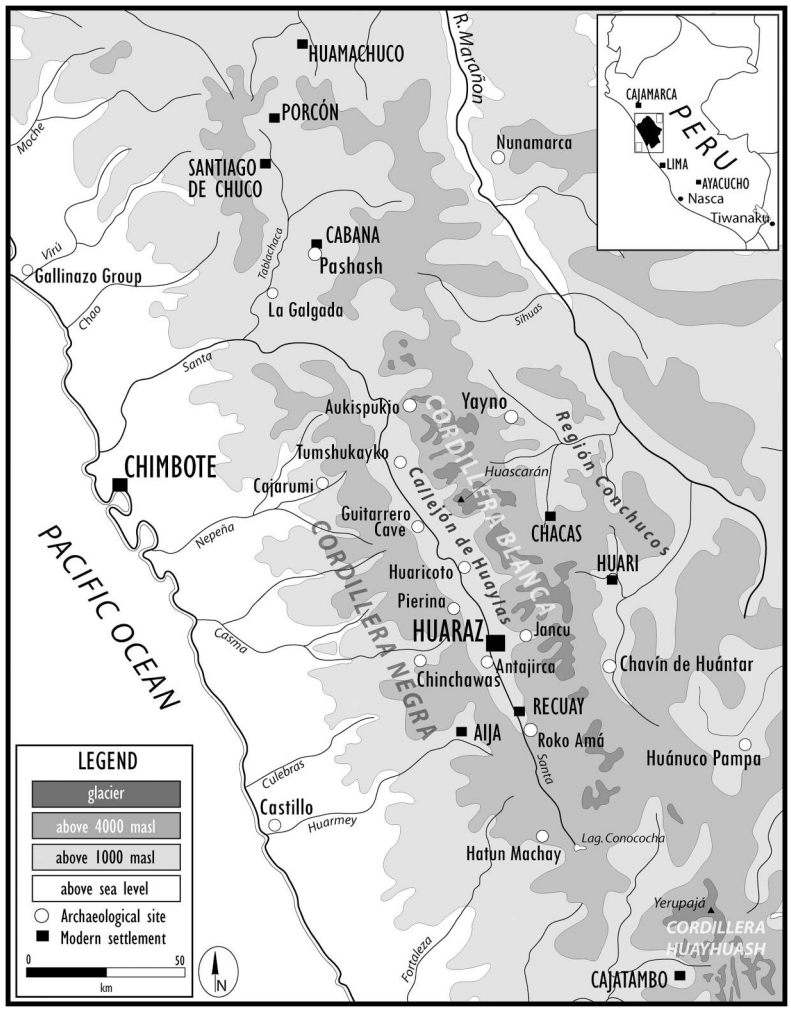


Figure 1. Map of north-central Peru, and places mentioned in text (George Lau).

but needs to rephrase it a little so that a prehistoric archaeology can weigh in: how and when do group leaders incorporate associations to divinity, and under what context?

This contribution concerns changing complexity in the Recuay culture of Peru's north-central highlands[1] (Figure 1) during the early first millennium AD.[2] Three major cultural innovations in leadership cosmology arose that helped convey the metahuman[3] otherness, or alterity, of special kinds of rulers. These include the lord as the ancestralized head of group (lineage, house) and the lord embodied as landscape form (boulders, mountains) (e.g. Lau 2010; 2016; 2018). In this study, we detail new evidence for an emergent third domain: their identification with storm divinities.

No writing system is known for the Recuay culture, so we lack insights available through written declarations or eyewitness records, which are critical in the study of divinity in rulership for other ancient peoples (e.g. Houston and Stuart 1996; Ossio 2020; Winter 2008; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2025). Instead, we examine the evidence of visual imagery, in concert with archaeological and ethnohistorical records of the Ancash highlands, including from recent field investigations at a key Recuay center, Pashash, near Cabana, Peru.

Taken together, the evidence points to the emergence of divinely sanctioned leaders, akin to those described for late prehispanic and colonial times for the region. In particular, Idolatries testimonies and oral accounts of mythic narratives and lineage genealogies identify apical storm divinities and their progeny as 'hijos del Rayo,' or children of the Thunderbolt or Lightning (divinity). This naming practice refers to the major highland storm gods and offspring, who become the founding progenitors and tutelary divinities of kin collectives that made up a regional ethnic polity or lordship[4] (Mariscotti de Görlitz 1972; Zuidema 1973). This article details new iconographic and archaeological clues that indicate much earlier takeup of this worldview by Recuay groups, which implicates also their basis in segmentary political organization.

## Inventing kings and things

The 2023 coronation of King Charles III was a striking show of how a sovereign is a living object, fabricated out of tradition and innovative artifice. We know from Ernst Kantorowicz (1957) that, for medieval Europe, kingship was conceived of as uniting two bodies, the physical individual and postholder (the body natural), and the body politic comprising the people and monarchy of the realm. Important rituals emerged to address the paradox of an institution in which the postholder dies, but whose polity and prosperity must be perpetuated. Notable studies have also argued that kingship invents and concentrates sovereign agency in different regal forms and moments, for example, through installation rituals (e.g. Hocart 1927), and the making of royal effigies, for use in funerals, oracles, sacrifices and other rituals (de Heusch 1997; Gose 1996; Kantorowicz 1957; Schnepel 2021). If rulership is by its very nature contingent and changing, material culture often intervenes to help express and mediate power relations, synchronically and through time.

Sovereigns are also willfully set apart from others through material culture (Brisch 2008). By this, we mean the physical and cognitive remove that leaders maintain from their subjects. Ontological difference, of course, is one pathway which creates this distance. This may have to do with proximity to gods, unusual skills and knowledge, and privileged capacities and access to sacred forces. But in addition, rare, costly and

elaborate royal items help serve as agentive extensions to help effect this distancing (e.g. Helms 1993): portraits, attire and accoutrements, not to mention palaces and monuments, all contribute to the complex domain of material culture which can promote and legitimize the royal person and institution.

Here we draw from what Alfred Gell (1998, Ch. 7) called 'externalist' strategies for inferring and engaging with object-persons (see also Lau and Chicoine 2025). Multiplying the image of persons through effigies can distribute and extend their presence to places where they cannot be in person or be regularly seen and sensed. Like cult images broadly, this has a particular kind of value for people because physical things (artworks and person-like objects) are not merely passive representations, but can be instantiations whose great appeal and power derive from their capacities to circulate and be interacted with physically (Gell 1998, 135). Effectively, royal things and persons (i.e. a crowned king) mediate social relations, and co-produce shared spaces and subjectivities between potentates, people, and the gods.

At its most basic, this essay contends that Recuay cultural forms like ceramic figural objects and sculptures, and places like palaces and hilltops, were new distributed forms of divinely-sanctioned lordship developing during the early centuries AD (also Lau 2010, 2016, 2018). Recuay's development coincided with wider socio-cultural dynamism during the first millennium (e.g. Makowski 2008b). Among the best studied are the dynamic polities of the Moche culture of Peru's North Coast, known for their great centralization of wealth in large civic-ceremonial centers along the coastal plains. Mythic narratives inscribed on art media, both monumental and portable, arose that conveyed the divinity of certain sovereigns. Ritual performances emphasized masked identities of high status women and men – as evidenced in burials, human sacrifice, and other contexts in large temples with public plazas (e.g. Bourget 2016; Donnan 2004; Makowski 2008a; Quilter and Castillo 2010; Trever 2022). Such ceremony, staged for large and small audiences, not only linked Moche nobles to divinities important for economic production in lower valley and marine environments; noble women and men appear to have taken on the trappings of their divine identities for these contexts, in life and during the afterlife.

Compared to the Moche, roughly coeval Recuay developments in the adjacent highlands featured very differently. The major Recuay villages, large and small, were established on fortified hilltops and other high, strategic areas for farming and herding (Bria 2017; Gamboa and Lau 2022; Grávalos and Sharp 2022; Grieder 1978; Lau 2011). Recuay social differentiation has been elucidated especially by mortuary variability and monumental architecture, as well as patterning in prestige objects, like fancy ceramics, metalwork and stone sculpture and their imagery (Cromphout 2014; Gamboa 2009; Gero 2004; Grávalos 2024; Hohmann 2010; Ibarra 2023; Lau 2006, 2010,

2011; Moretti 2017, 2019; Ponte 2014; Wegner 2011). By the fourth century AD, cultural patterns suggest greater explicit social differentiation along gender lines, and variability in wealth, labour access, and prestige based on warfare and herding. In this essay, we argue that overt access to ancestral divinity and sanction was another strategic field in the consolidation of village groups and regional polities (Helms 1998; Sahlins 2017).

The most revealing evidence for Recuay social differentiation comes from the figural imagery of modelled ceramic vessels (Figure 2) and stone-carvings (Figure 3). This is an imperfect record, beset by sampling biases, a dearth of middle-range comparisons, museum collections with restorations and modern replicas, and insufficient provenience information.[5] Still, the corpus is significant because the imagery articulates new, and relatively coherent, interests in leadership and how it operated. In particular, these media are the only sources which express how the ancient people conceived of themselves and relations of power between various beings in the world, human and nonhuman alike (Lau 2011, Ch.7).

Recuay's human figural imagery and compositions appeared without much precedent in the region, and reveals overhauled cultural priorities from the antecedent Chavín civilization (ca. 900–400 BC) (Burger 1992; Fux 2011). For example, women's roles were regularly depicted for the first time in the Andean highlands, principally as noble partners paired with men and as officiants in lordly display and veneration (e.g. providers of drink; drummers and celebrants; participants in sex and installation rites) (Figure 2(A–C)) (Cromphout 2014; Gero 1999; Moretti 2017). Social status was construed through warrior display (weapons, trophies), herding symbolism and dutiful attention to ancestral lords in burial cult, none of which featured much before in Chavín (Lau 2011; 2013). Equally telling is what was put aside and effectively silenced: namely, monster imagery and abstraction, shamanistic cult, and pilgrimage temples.

Not only were humans routinely depicted for the first time, but Recuay lords, by and large, got top billing (Figure 2). The pottery imagery is potent precisely because it portrayed culture-wide tropes, detailed elsewhere as 'genres of action' (Lau 2011, 213–219). These correspond to native notions of what made a proper leader. Recuay artisans put lords in the center of compositions and made them larger and more elaborately attired than other figures (Grieder 1992). They are carried by others in a litter (Figure 2(D)), and trumpeted as warriors. They lead or hold a camelid, or are gifted one by others. They are flanked by profile predators, holding them in abeyance. They are celebrated by their kin, who present headdresses, small bundles, and drinking goblets (Figure 2(B,C)).

These scenes, taken together, thus comprised a way of seeing that is diagnostic for Recuay. Yet they should not be taken as objective snapshots of real life and ritual, nor portraits interested in personal likeness. Despite


Figure 2. Modelled Recuay vessels showing lordly figures: (A) standing individual (courtesy Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin); and (B–D) multifigure genre compositions with large, male central figure with attendants/officiants; (B) shows veneration scene with cupholders (courtesy of Världskulturmuseerna, Goteborg); (C) shows scene in front of burial shrine (courtesy of Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia, Lima); (D) shows a seated lord carried in a litter (courtesy of Pamparomás Municipality collection).

the variability of the subject and quality of execution from site to site, the modelled imagery embeds a highly androcentric gaze about how the 'lord' (stylized, with highly generic features) was central to the various human and metahuman interactions in emerging highland traditions. It stands

Figure 3. Carved stone slab, showing frontal splayed figure with cleft headdress and diamond-shaped torso with cross. Two skull-like heads surmount the serrated crest; the base shows step-fret designs (Photo by George Lau, courtesy of Museo Arqueológico Zonal de Cabana).

to reason that the vessels helped recognize the acts and social interactions that helped descendants ensure the validity of the station (e.g. lordship, the head person, the place of highest standing) and the lineage.

It should be remembered that this pottery is typically found in tombs and shrine contexts, and their main purpose was to accompany the esteemed deceased as offerings and stand-ins in their adoration by the descendant group. Vessels sometimes depict multifigural compositions (Figure 2(B–D)), while others show single figures (Figure 2(D)) that could be placed together to form tableaus, arrangements important to each lineage's cult (e.g. Gamboa 2009; Lau 2013; Moretti 2017; Wegner 1988). We can surmise that the vessels helped descendants interact (e.g. drink, see, hear, venerate with their illustrious forebears (as preserved mummies and effigies) – enabling their physical handling and interaction so important for consecration and ongoing recognition (Gell 1998). This also takes lithic expression when stonecarvings are mounted in/on burial monuments (see below). Hence, the imagery was more than merely leadership rhetoric, surplus energy, or materialized ideology disguising exploitation of subjects

and their resources. Rather, these objects are better approximated as instruments to help facilitate the group's subjectivity required for an ancestor's legitimacy and continuity of the line.[6]

Recent excavations help contextualize relevant practices at the site level, specifically at one of the best-known Recuay centers, Pashash (Lau et al. 2023; Lau and Brito, 2023). The new work investigates the development of kin-based, segmentary polities, those political arrangements headed by native lords, called *caciques*, *kurakas* or *señores* (Arana Bustamante 2010; Espinoza Soriano 1964; Ramírez 2005; Salomon 1986; Zuidema 1973). Such groups are well-documented historically in northern Ancash, especially as they were integrated during Inca and Spanish rule (e.g. Chocano 2016; Cook 1977; León Gómez 2018; Zevallos Quiñones 1991; Zuloaga 2012), but their beginnings remain far from clear. Our recent work at Pashash (3150 masl), near Cabana, has now yielded rich new data to track the settlement's growth and cultural patterning before, during and after Recuay occupation (Lau et al. 2023).

This investigation builds directly on Terence Grieder's pioneering work (1978) at Pashash. His team discovered an important burial and offerings (see below), which he attributed to the rise of Recuay period nobles. Grieder (1978, 155, 182, 189) saw Pashash's corporate art style emerging for its new 'ruling class' founded on shamanic traditions and priestly power based on a feline/jaguar cult; both were interpreted as legacies of Chavín civilization, Recuay's predecessors in the region (also Tello 1923). He later updated this thinking by comparing the imagery to the arts of other societies, especially West African kingdoms (Grieder 1992, 181). He suggested that the Recuay practiced a sacred kingship where rulers embodied mythical types and occupied roles in a recurring, patterned history. His argument was largely visual: like Benin depictions of *oba* kings, Recuay had 'centered compositions,' frontally-depicted, oversized humans (sacred kings) flanked by subordinates (e.g. felines, retainers, warriors). Moreover, distinctive headgear in Pashash's imagery was taken as recurring signs of high office, shared by gods and humans alike (1992, 183–184). While we do not rule out the impact of shamanic practices or Chavín-related traditions, the new data, as we will detail delow, are more consistent with a model of Recuay lordship based on the legitimacy of ancestors and an idealized mythical order founded on geneaological ties. This is also in keeping with comparisons to cases of ethnic groups known historically for highland Ancash.

## Some words about lords, lightning and leadership

Before we turn to the archaeological evidence, we should highlight key indigenous terms and concepts, since it is in the semiotic domain of leadership that Andean language and materiality must have met. It is

unclear, however, what language(s) Recuay peoples spoke. If modern toponymy is indicative, Quechua, the predominant indigenous language today in highland Ancash, seems to be the likeliest ancient language for most Recuay groups. Some sites show Aymara and Culle toponyms; vestiges of Culle continued up until the twentieth century in the region (Pallasca) of this case study (Lau 2012).

Notwithstanding, César Itier's (2023) ethnolinguistic study is relevant here for illuminating the uses of key Quechua terms in the Andean literature, and tracking the critical lexical shifts and meanings during colonial times. The older prehispanic usages are of special interest, especially the terms *apu* and *kuraqa* (var. *kuraka, curaca)*, long seen as 'mountain spirits/divinities' and 'native lords,' respectively. *Apu* and *kuraq*(a) have strongly adjectival roots, basically as honorific terms for extraordinary exemplars within a class (like lords for people, or an icecap within a mountain range).

*Apu* means 'mayor' (Spanish for great, old, major) or mighty in force, power, or size, and can describe a person, place or thing (Itier 2023, Ch.1). It also describes lords, the greatest and oldest/most venerable among people. Meanwhile, *kuraqa* is also pegged to *mayor*, within a group, including family, lineage or *ayllu* (Itier 2023: Ch.5, 123), hence the 'head' person. It also has significance as 'older brother.'

Interestingly, *apu* is not a common term in the early colonial documents for the Ancash highlands, or in historical toponyms (see Lau 2018, 101–105). *Raju* (var. *raho*; also *rao* and *razu*, or snow caps) or *jirca* (mountain or stony mound) were preferred to refer to mountains, the mightiest of lordly embodiments; their whiteness and jagged formations signaled their venerable age and greatness. It is worth noting that the fanciest Recuay vessels used fine white kaolin clays and featured chiefly leaders who preside, precisely as large mound-like presences. They also sometimes take on added dimensions in symbolic corporeal reach, such as the house, defensive compound or burial shrine (Figure 2(C)) (Lau 2011, Figures 21–23). Their rotund fullness and centrality are consistent with Andean traditions emphasizing the generosity of leaders crucial for labour recruitment and corporate well-being (e.g. Allen 1988; Bray 2015; Cummins 2002; Gose 1994; Jennings and Swenson 2018; Kosiba, Janusek, and Cummins 2020; Ramírez 2005; Pillsbury 2025).

Most major Recuay settlements sit atop ridgelines and mountains – the places preferred by successful lineages to build their monuments and palatial compounds. Typified by defensive positioning and access to agro-pastoral lands, the large Recuay centers (e.g. Yayno, Pashash) also occupied very special locations to see and be seen, including by one's mighty ancestors (Lau 2011, Ch.3–4; 2018). Such tutelary beings were probably among the most important arbiters in the symbolic economy of localized resources, like stone, metals and minerals from special

outcrops (Litschi 2022), clay sources (Grávalos 2024), or meltwater from a glacier (Walter 2002; Herrera 2024). In fact, various Idolatries testimonies from the region make very clear that ancestral embodiments were worshipped specifically for their powers over the affordances of food, animals and other key resources specific to their respective descendants and lands (e.g. Arriaga 1999; Hernández Príncipe 1923; Polia 1999).

A 1618 report by the idolatries inspector, Lic. Jhoan Delgado, named three dozen *huaca* shrines/idols of the Cabana region, including Pashash ('Pasas').[7] Many can be identified today by their toponyms, and most were hilltops or prominent landscape features, which were maintained by their respective collectives and leaders (Alvarez 2001; Cuba 2018, 2019).[8] A 1543 visita to Pallasca and Corongo tallied some seventy-seven small communities, none having more than fifty families (Cook 1977, 25).[9]

The main analogy for our interpretation draws from the widespread cults of storm gods across the high Andes around the time of the Spanish conquest (Gade 1983; Rostworowski 1988). These major divinities of Central Peru included Pariacaca, Catequil, Llibiac (var. Lliviac) and [el] 'Rayo,' Spanish for lightning or thunderbolt.[10] The literature on these gods is very rich, with many continuities in beliefs and ritual practices in the past and present (e.g. Bennison 2022; Cardich 2000; Fuenzalida 1980; Hernández 2006; Makowski and Rucabado 2000; Salomon 2018; Salomon and Urioste 1991; Staller and Stross 2013; Tello and Miranda 1923; Topic and Topic 2020). While storm god religiosity is well-studied through the colonial and ethnographic evidence, much less is known about its deeper antiquity and materiality;[11] most work has concentrated on the Inca and late prehistoric record of the high Andes (e.g. Cardich 2000; Lane 2023; Monteverde 2011; Ramón Joffré 2014; Topic 2020).

Based on ethnohistorical data, Ana María Mariscotti de Görlitz (1972) recognized key cultural patterns where the 'lord[s] of meteorological phenomena' presided. These were the supreme tutelary beings of their respective provinces, with considerable followings, even after the tumultuous conquests by the Inca and the Spanish. Gendered male, they provisioned rain, and directly controlled atmospheric phenomena (lightning, thunder, storms, winds, snow and hail). They and their collectives were cast as foreign upstarts and newly arriving conquerors, not unlike something Sahlins' stranger-king model would predict (1985). Originally from the mountain heights and associated with camelids/herding, they came to settle (also, 'conquer') the lower agricultural lands, coming to be in complementary opposition (e.g. in marriage, economic and ritual work) with aboriginal telluric divinities (and aboriginal farming collectives), gendered female (Silverblatt 1987). The storm gods had strong associations to warfare, conquest and fertility.[12] This cosmology explicitly

emphasized group and landscape productivity: the vigour of rainy tempests, being like the flash and clamour of war, tilling the earth, and sexual union. These renewed people and the land (see Bennison 2022; Gose 1994; Kemper Columbus 1990; Salomon 2018).

The storm divinities were also embodied in mountains and high outcrops, where their cults and estates (e.g. lands, shrines, idols, officiants, equipment/valuables) were emplaced, and from whence their powers issued. They were themselves the offspring of older creator divinities, born from eggs[13] or plunged from the heavens, who then conquered, populated and divvied up the landscape with their brothers. Each of these gods and his sons were revered as 'hijos del Rayo.' The progeny shared in the divinity's being and were lineage founders, who, in time, were also cast as culture heroes. In other words, the 'hijos del Rayo' were ancestralized persons and installed as the 'head' (cf. *curi/churi*, *apu*, *curaca/kuraka*) position of segmented polities for the regions in question (Mariscotti de Görlitz 1972; also Zuidema 1973; Silverblatt 1987, Ch.4). This epithet was recorded, for example (Chart 1), in Otuco village (Cajatambo).

Hernández Príncipe's (1923) accounts of extirpation visits (1621–1622) also make clear that many other *ayllu* groups in southern Ancash and Cajatambo regions named individuals after Llibiac. Many were in group geneaologies and individuals of the herding (*llachuas*) division, though it is not clear they needed to be or were always considered the lineage heads. By the early 1600s, the naming of children after the local gods, like Llibiac and Santiago, was increasingly forbidden by the church (Arriaga 1999, 64).

In colonial Recuay, the thunderbolt divinity (Rayo) was 'represented in and considered three persons': Llíbiac (Rayo), Ñámoc (his father) and Uchu Llíviac (the son).[14] Besides the allusion to the Christian-like holy trinity, the observation gestures to Rayo's godly being as composite and multigenerational, one that extended beyond linear time and could bracket ranked nodes in a geneaology.[15] Crucially, Tom Zuidema (1973, 28) observed the importance of parallel descent (matrilineal

<table>
<tr><td colspan="6">Apu libia Cancharco (Rayo)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">aillo chaupis Osirac Otuc</td><td colspan="2">aillo xulca</td><td colspan="2">aillo Allauca</td></tr>
<tr><td>Libiac Choquerunto</td><td>Libiac Carua Runtuy</td><td>libiac Raupoma</td><td>Vichupoma</td><td>libiac Nauim Tupia</td><td>libiac Guac tupiac</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">▼ Subsequent generations (further removed from "hijos del Rayo") ▼</td></tr>
</table>

Chart 1. The progeny of the Lightning, Libiac Cancharco, who become the enshrined *llibiac* ancestors (*hijos del Rayo*) of three segmentary lineage collectivities (*aillo*, or *ayllu*), Otuco, Cajatambo, 1656 (from Duviols 2003, 226; see also Mariscotti de Görlitz 1972, Cuadro 1).

and patrilineal) among these lineages in colonial Recuay. Patrilineal reckoning, however, was the principal side recorded for dynastic purposes to emphasize what Irene Silverblatt, following Zuidema, called a 'conquest hierarchy' for the participant group (1987, esp.72–75,79–80). Notably, the pattern for most groups was that, regardless of historical circumstances, the ancestral system of about four generations and ranked 'conqueror-led' segments was the model dynastic structure. The culture heroes and their progeny in the uppermost tiers were seen to partake in the patron supremacy of the Rayo/Thunderbolt. Those in later generations, further removed from the Rayo and the line, probably saw 'sinking status' (see Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 11). Just how far back might the worldview and practice of a 'cosmic polity'[16] owing to storm gods go?

## Lordly associations and the Recuay culture

Previously, investigations revealed a series of Recuay tradition monoliths (Figure 4) at a small Recuay tradition village. All were associated with mausolea (*chullpa* burial shrines), small houses and modest enclosed plazas and platforms, and dated to roughly AD 500–800. Frontal splayed figures were carved on vertical and horizontal slabs; those on

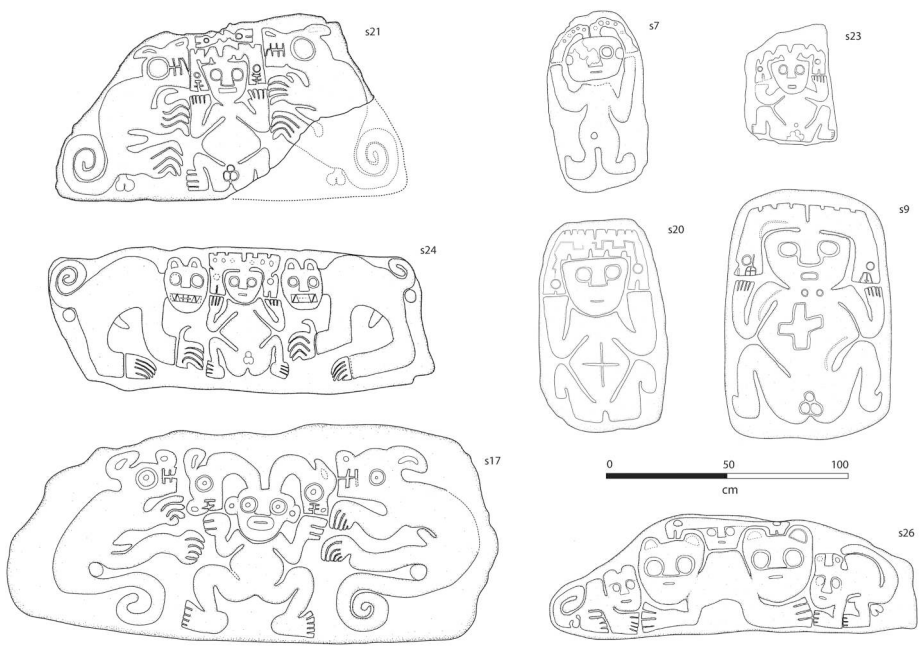


Figure 4. Horizontal and vertical stone sculptures at Chinchawas, showing splayed figures and figures flanked by feline creatures. Drawings by George Lau.

the latter are flanked by feline creatures. All evidence points to them as the ancestor effigies of local funerary cults (Lau 2006; 2011).

While uncommon, such frontal figures also occur in Recuay pottery and stonecarvings found today in museum and private collections (Figures 2(C), 3, 4), and occasionally on textiles and cast metalwork. Certain features are diagnostic: diamond or triangular body, often marked by a cross; frontal depiction; raised arms. Appendages arching over the figure's head are especially emphasized, sometimes resembling a headdress crowning the figure, other times like creatures physically issuing from the head. It is commonly crenelated or serrated, and there may be complementary zigzag elements, perhaps having serpentine, riverine and lightning bolt associations. Sometimes the appendage seems to peel off and create another (hovering) figure, itself bicephalic (Figure 4, s21, s26).

In Recuay art, the crest and appendages are a telltale sign that the figure is somehow an extraordinary being (Lau 2006, 244–246). The elements are both a sign and locus for transformation. Commonly, body parts and extremities, of both humans and creatures, are replaced by such headed appendages. They issue from tongues, snouts, ears, feet, tails, and, very occasionally, from penises. This may be a continuation of the visual convention in earlier Chavín and Formative period imagery, which emphasized bodily features and exuviae which terminate in feline heads and snakes (Burger 1992). Rowe (1962) saw these as visual 'kennings,' referring to the Old Norse literary device which likened bodily features to other things, usually fanged animals, like felines and snakes (e.g. 'hair of snakes'). Frontal anthropomorphs with zoomorphic head appendages were also common in later cultures of the Central Andes (Carrión Cachot 1959; Makowski 2000, 2008b; Menzel 1977).

The appendages of the crest vary in form and have their own dynamism. The appendage's heads (Figure 4) can be rendered in profile (feline-like), but also from top-down (triangular serpent-like) and frontal (anthropomorphic) perspectives. They are also often split or bifurcated. Bifurcation or splitness is prominent in highland Andean beliefs and understood as important signs of divine instantiation. These point to where thunderbolts have struck, literally cleaving the spot or something in two (Bennison 2022; Gade 1983; Staller and Stross 2013). Spanish priests identified a range of things that native Andeans attributed to lightning strikes (e.g. twins, special births, unusual human forms[17] and stones, landscape features, paired shrines/mountains), and derided them as superstition. Yet thunderstorms are no small matter in the Andean highlands. They are a regular source of injury and death, of humans and animals alike, and destructive loss to fields, farms and buildings. Neither anthropogenic nor natural, the strikes are understood as purposeful but unpredictable 'hierophanies' (Gade 1983, 773).[18]

The Quechua term *illapa* (var. *yllapa*) is germane in this regard. This is the name of the storm god common in the southern Andes (Rostworowski 1988, 39; Staller and Stross 2013). It is also the term for lightning and other atmospheric electricity phenomena. Notably, *illapa* also referred to mummy bundles, including those of the Inca sovereigns (Guaman Poma de Ayala 1980, f288[290]; Polia 1999, 180–182; Pino 2010, 105). In 1580s, the idolatries inspector Cristóbal de Albornoz discussed preserved corpses generally as *yllapa* (in Duviols 1984, 196).[19] Illapa's root term 'illa' describes something treasured and resplendent, and a concept of wealth/valuable centered on its productivity, special essences and reciprocal obligations (Salomon 2004), and, quite aptly for a bundle, something in safekeeping (Duviols 1984, 220–221).[20] Moreover, *illapa* also refers to colonial firearms (González Holguin 1989, 366–367), no doubt owing to similarities in the explosive flashes and thunderclaps of storms. We might surmise the bundles themselves were precious and pregnant with the bright, electric potency of the ancestral divinities. We propose that early signs of this ideology and semantic bundle began to appear by the early centuries AD in highland Ancash.

John Staller and Brian Stross (2013, 50–52) have observed how mountain divinities, both Pre-Columbian and colonial, were identified with crosses. To be sure, distinct religious traditions are at play, but marking important pagan stones and places with crosses was highly strategic in Christian conversion. The widespread cults of patron saint Santiago, especially, found syncretic resonance with the storm gods since the saint was also a conqueror, whose iconic feat was to rain fire from the heavens to defeat Moorish infidels in defense of Christianity. Santiago brandishes a sword and rides a horse, whose actions, like the flash and din of victorious battle and clapping hooves, 'contributed to the apotheosis of Santiago Matamoros as a lordly, omnipotent epiphany in Andean folk religion' (Gade 1983, 778; cf. Hernández 2006). Old burial and ritual places would be planted with Christian crosses (for Ancash, see Duviols 2003; Lane 2020; Mariscotti de Görlitz 1972; Venturoli 2011).

For Cabana, the aforementioned 1618 document described the fervent Christianization of pagan places, including Pashash ('Pasas') and a nearby huaca of Catequil. Indigenous peoples planted crosses there and lineage heads were charged with their upkeep and good behavior on threat of public flogging (Alvarez 2001; Cuba 2019). The same document observes that Cabana's communities venerated the lightning-thunder divinity, named as 'llibiac o cunyac' (Alvarez 2001, n.p.; Cuba 2019, 120). It is notable that two major storm god cults, Catequil and Llibiac, could prevail in the same valley. Not coincidentally, Santiago remains the patron saint of Cabana today.

Figure 3 shows one of the best known Recuay stonecarvings. Removed from the Pashash site, it was added to the Cabana archaeology museum's

emerging collection in the mid-1960s (Acosta 2012, 69). Like most sculptures in the museum, it was probably mounted on an important Pashash building (Wiener 1880, 167–170). The design is also found, more commonly, on fine serving pottery (esp. bowls, basins) from the site, and dated ca. AD 300–600 (Figure 5). Executed finely in low relief, the carving depicts a figure in frontal splayed position with raised arms and a serrated headdress ending in profile heads; its torso is diamond-shaped and marked with a cross. Torso crosses are common on Recuay anthromorphic images on pottery and sculpture: they seem to mark sacred beings, places and things, and perhaps to signal junctures (like *axis mundi*) for dynamic forces and transformation (e.g. Lau 2016, 125, 141, 147). More unusual elements include: two skull-like heads atop a headdress band, perhaps war trophies; ears that split into scroll-like elements; a serrated diamond-shape framing the torso and cross; and three step-motifs of a terraced platform-like base. The serrations resemble the repeating triangles adorning the flaring hems of tunics sometimes worn by lords in pottery (Figures 2(A),10; Lau 2011, 49, 52).

Also significant is the outlining or nested layers around the figure, made by incisions, careful removal of stone/background, and jagged serration of various elements. The extra carving imparted an almost pulsing outer shell or aura to the figure.[21] In painted ceramics and cloth, a related way to denote mythical status and this energy (rays or radiance?), was to add short repeating ticks and L's to key figures and elements (Figure 5(C)).

Rather than a generalized Recuay deity, we believe that many splayed figures were depictions of local ancestors, esteemed progenitors, who have been accorded storm god associations by their descendant groups (also Lau 2006, 244). In addition to the imagery, this is because splayed figures decorated stone slabs mounted on burial structures and ritual veneration spaces (Figure 2(C)). They are also stylistically quite variable, even within site corpuses, suggesting multiple individuals and multiple small and chronologically distinct foci for worship, rather than one unitary sculptural program or place (Lau 2006, 236–240; 2011, Ch.6).

Our recent fieldwork at Pashash uncovered several dozen new carved monoliths, including whole and broken blocks. The most notable include: a condor (sculpted in-the-round) atop a stepped base, two *tableros* (probably gameboards), a tenon-head sculpture, and several carved frieze blocks. Given their contexts, we think that most of the sculptures were originally installed on the interior walls of the main compound (Compound 1, La Capilla sector), and most likely on or near the burial shrine discovered by Grieder (1978). Perhaps a handful featured on the main entrance façade and staircases (Lau et al. 2023). Most of the sculptures appeared in later collapse and fill layers, although several were found in situ in post-Recuay occupation walls, reused with their respective images shown on shoddily made walls.


Figure 5. Large kaolinite pottery pouring basins, with interior-painted frontal figures, crowned by paired head appendages, Pashash. Photos by Mirko Brito.


Figure 6. Carved stone blocks (photos A–C and drawings A'–C') from Compound 1 (Pashash) showing 'crested bundle' figure. B and C were found in 2019/2022, and A in 2003. A and B, both with crosses, may have formed a pair to flank a doorway or another sculpture (splayed figure?). Note the dual step motif atop the figure (in C and C'), echoing its crest. Photos (A) Steve Wegner and (B,C) George Lau.

Several new stonecarvings have imagery strongly related to the splayed figure (Figure 6). They feature a motif seldom found in Recuay culture: a figure with a teardrop-shaped body topped by a profile feline head and a crest appendage; both the body and the appendage sprout two-digit

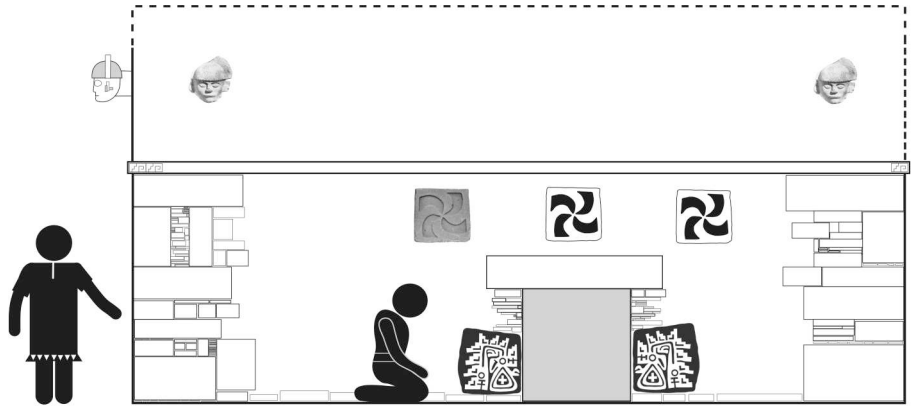

Figure 7. Artist's reconstruction of burial shrine of Compound 1. It featured very high quality stonemasonry and various carved blocks, including tenon-heads and carved friezes, found near the building, were probably mounted on the walls. Various blocks with the four-spoke whirl design are known from Pashash, including two recently excavated. Image by George Lau.

claws.[22] Identification remains very provisional, but there are visual clues (crest, torso cross, aura) to indicate that this is an incarnation of the frontal splayed figure, but as a 'crested bundle,' as if in a pupal, seed or egg-like state. The outer shell or wrapping (nested layers) of the bundle is almost certainly related to that of the splayed figure in Figure 3.

One crested bundle (Figure 6(C,C')), in lieu of a cross, features a five-pointed element, a rare element in Recuay art. But it may bear some relation to Moche vessels taking the form of a fist or a five-peaked mountain (with middle element emphasized), which serves as the backdrop for ritual sacrifice or mountain-based activities (e.g. Bourget 2016, Figures 5.112, 5.129; Lau 2018, Figure 3.1; see also Lau 2010). The importance of 'five' has been noted in colonial-era death practices and ritual cosmology in the Central Highlands (Salomon and Urioste 1991, 270; Cardich 2000, 79). It is also notable that the eminent storm god Pariacaca originated as five eggs, to comprise falcons/humans, a fivefold brotherhood which coordinated presence – literally, rained and reigned – across five directions;[23] his main landscape embodiment may have been a five-point mountain or landform (see Astuhuaman 2008; Hernández Garavito 2019, 305ff.).

Ultimately, the foregoing adds to our understanding of Recuay tradition depictions of splayed figures. We can now consider them as related to an emerging highland tradition where expired individuals, prepared into ('illapa') bundles, become enshrined as illustrious ancestors, specifically as 'storm divinities' characterized by war and lightning attributes. Found almost always near tombs and funerary shrines (see Figures 2(C),7), the crested figures appear to show stages (namely,

bundled → splayed) in the apotheosis of expired forebears into ancestral divinities. It would follow that imparting storm god associations to visual materials and embodiments probably worked in parallel to receiving a title and adoration by others (e.g. as 'hijo del Rayo,' 'Llibiac'). Discussing colonial Recuay groups, Silverblatt (1987, 79) asserted,

> The rite of renaming [to 'Rayo'] celebrated the new, consecrated bond of kinship which tied mortals to the divine ancestor of the conqueror-founder of *ayllus*. Carrying his name, they were bound to him. It was an emblem of their devotion.

## Further comparisons and discussion

Stone sculpture was not the only medium at Pashash that expressed divinity in leadership. Excavations in the burial shrine encountered a major cache of ritual offerings which also bear on the problem (Lau et al. 2023). The cache was found in the southern corner of Compound 1, in a small, purpose-built, and irregularly shaped chamber (base, ca. 1.5 × 1.7 m). At least three other nearby offering caches were located nearby and dedicated to a noble's burial (Grieder 1978), built up over time between the third and sixth centuries AD. The caches are some of the earliest and most impressive evidence of Recuay ancestor veneration rituals: revisitation to make periodic offerings to a noble interment (Lau et al. 2023).

Over three dozen cast and gilt copper pins were recovered (Figures 8 and 9). Their forms and fabrication techniques are very similar to examples found previously at Pashash (Grieder 1978; Velarde and de la Mata 2010). Their form and imagery vary somewhat, probably due to time differences in their manufacture and use. Notably, the floating form atop the bundle on the slab sculpture (Figure 6(C)) features as a stepped, cleft headdress crowning lordly figures on different media (Figure 10), including a pair of pins (Figure 8). This headdress form occurred in other cultures, including Moche and Gallinazo (Virú) (Makowski 2008a; Giersz 2025). Scholars have discussed it as two mountains, stepped pyramid-platforms, and as emblems of high chiefly rank. These may well hold true, but we believe, based on the foregoing about conquering lightning beings, that the cleft headdress form probably signalled a lordly status with a martial designation for the Pashash Recuay.[24]

The same offering cache contained earspools, whose imagery and manufacture are unequivocally Moche (Figure 11). They show two rampant felines, which, when worn, flanked the wearer's head. 'Flanked-by-felines' was among the most iconic designs in Recuay art. Apparently, Moche metalworkers replicated this Recuay pictorial theme, but using an unmistakably Moche object type and technology.[25] Overall, the earspools stand as the most compelling evidence known for high-

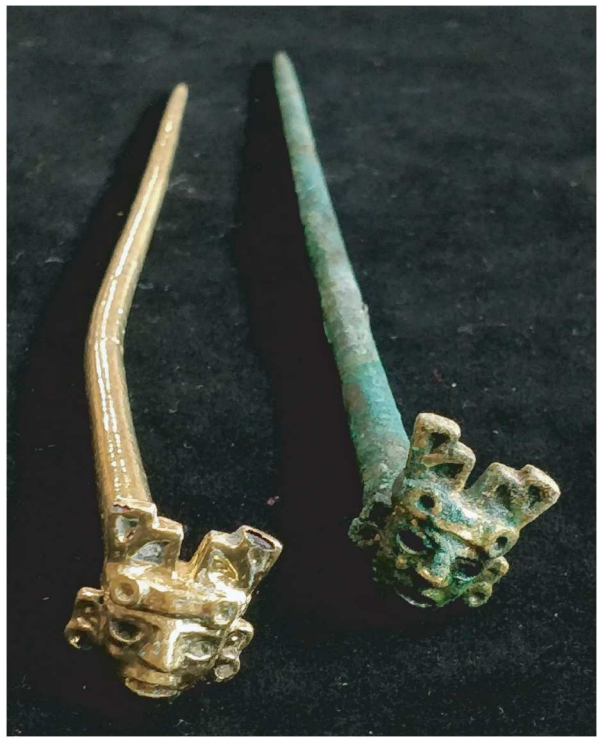

Figure 8. Gilt copper shawl pins (left specimen is restored). Each pinhead shows a human head wearing ear ornaments and dual stepped, or cleft, headdress. Photo by George Lau.

status Recuay interaction with their powerful coastal neighbors. Perhaps the earspools were commissioned by Pashash's rulers or were acquired through gift exchange or as a war trophy.


Figure 9. Three shawl pins, showing frontal heads (left) and standing figure (right), cast and gilt copper with turquoise inlays. The conical pinheads on these are also rattles. The spiky fringe may allude to bright emanations, like rays and light. Photos by Mirko Brito (left) and George Lau (right).

Figure 10. Stone bowl and pottery sherd showing figures wearing dual-stepped headgear. On either side of the frontal figure (left) is a profile feline. Illustrations adapted from Grieder (1978, Pl.4, 236).

The flanked-by-felines imagery also helps identify for whom the ear-spools were intended. Given the cache's early dating associated with the foundations of Compound 1, we hypothesize that they were for an esteemed individual venerated near the onset of Pashash as a monumental center, perhaps someone who was considered its founding ancestor. The 'flanked-by-felines' subject was, by no means, limited to Pashash or even Recuay groups (Lau 2006; 2016, 171). Long before the Recuay, the Black-and-White Portal (early half 1st millennium BC) served as the entry façade of the main temple at Chavín de Huántar; a charismatic priest or ruler entering it would be seen as mediating two fearsome winged predators carved on the columns (Burger 1992). The trope of

Figure 11. Moche ear spools excavated from offering cache. The 'flanked-by-felines' trope was a long-lived association for Andean leaders, especially in the Ancash highlands. (Photo by George Lau).

Figure 12. Entrance to ceremonial sector building, Inca administrative center of Huánuco Pampa, facing east (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

flanking felines reappeared in Inca culture, seen most iconically in the doorway sculptures of nearby Huánuco Pampa, ca. AD 1500 (Figure 12). Inca sovereigns ('sons of the Sun') would seize upon a long-lived tradition of stonework treating the region's 'flanked-by-felines' subject for the monumental thresholds of Huánuco Pampa.

Finally, the gilt pins merit some additional consideration. Most of the conical head pins are also rattles; the pinheads contain small stones which, when shaken, produce a distinctive metallic clinking against the copper walls. This almost certainly complemented their shininess and gold's association with the gleam of the sun and other celestial phenomena (also Pillsbury 2025). The great Peruvianist, Julio C. Tello (1923, 219–230), ventured that the toothy front-face heads (e.g. Figure 5) so typical in Recuay are, in fact, images of celestial beings, probably a solar jaguar divinity (also Grieder 1978, 188–189). Scholars since have discussed the variability of the motif, emphasizing its 'radiance' or their association to the night sky and women (Hohmann 2003; Makowski and Rucabado 2000). Notably, the most elaborate of Pashash's rattle-pins feature a spiky fringe on the pinhead (Figure 9). When worn as shawl pins attached at the shoulders,[26] the spikes radiate outward toward the viewer, and only then is the top image exposed. Depicted inside are the key beings in the cosmos of the noble collective at Pashash: owls and felines with profile bodies, crested felines, feline heads, as well as frontal helmeted human

heads and standing lords. These faced forward to countenance, and dazzle, those who beheld the esteemed wearer.

## Conclusion

In sum, this study has focused on significant cultural innovations in Peru's north highlands during the early first millennium AD, which began to impart newfound divine associations and statuses to special, powerful members of highland society. Based on clues from imagery, new contextual evidence from a major Recuay center, and the wider archaeological and historical record, we have argued that some Recuay leaders came to share in the identity and qualities of regional storm divinities.

In particular, we detailed what may be early cultural expressions of the 'hijos del Rayo' cosmology. Known primarily for later prehistoric and early colonial segmentary societies of the central Peruvian highlands, we believe it may have been a mythic geneaological structure for some Recuay tradition groups, and a basis for their leadership and ancestor ritual by the fourth century AD.

The imagery appears to have depicted transformations of lords into ancestral beings. A number of groups across the Recuay region appear to have adopted the suite of storm god associations – not least war, rugged mountain heights, rain-bringing vitality and recurring *illapa* imagery sharing distinctive visual elements (esp. serrated headdress and appendages, clefting, rayed brilliance). It is probably not coincidental that this ideology became entrenched precisely when economic practices in Recuay and the wider highlands, broadly, increasingly centred on herd wealth and high altitude zones for agro-pastoral production and fortified settlement (Lau 2010; 2018; Lau et al. 2023).

We also detailed archaeological contexts at the Recuay center of Pashash, where monuments and various cultural media became embroiled in the innovations linking nobles to ancestors. Most notably, the data presented came from the context of unprecedented burial cult *within* a palatial compound, a 'setting apart' of ritual-regal concerns and privileges for early highland lords.

Splayed figures with bifurcated head appendages were carved in many parts of highland Ancash, especially the Huaraz area and Cordillera Negra, and more rarely in the Conchucos (Lau 2011; Moretti 2019). While the sample of dated sites is small, it seems clear that this popularization is later (ca. AD 500–800) and in the more southern areas of the Recuay tradition.[27] What is more, later developments proliferated to small, less elaborate shrines and artefact contexts (that is, not in palatial or monumental enclosures), indicating that the innovations could be adopted by groups who were much less outwardly centralized and successful than those at Pashash.

Absent voices and texts, we are left with archaeology, historical analogies, and imagery to reconstruct how ancient peoples called, understood and stylized their rulers. Ultimately, our discussion concerns what Sahlins called a 'cosmic polity,' referring to a political structure involving hierarchical relations between humans and numinous beings together – a cosmopolitics not constrained *prima facie* by secular/sacred or real/mythic oppositions (Graeber and Sahlins 2017; see also Lau and Chicoine 2025).

Notably, the study observes that many indicators for divinized leadership were in place long before Inca Tawantinsuyu. Given the emphasis on mountains, thunderstorms and species like condors and pumas, the Recuay case attended to distinctly highland understandings of social relations and hierarchy. By the late fifteenth century, the Incas leaned on a solar cult and divinity to upstage those lordships owed to the storm gods of the Andean heights. Inca sovereigns, of course, projected themselves as children of the Sun (divinity), a solar hierarchy and logic to rule them all. Meanwhile, Recuay's coastal neighbors, the Moche, had developed very different mythical and political traditions to frame their polities, looking to divinities of the sea, mythical predators/sacrificers, and priestesses (e.g. Makowski 2008b; Rucabado and Pardo 2016).

Without writing, many Andean collectivities turned to material things, ritual and landscape to help tell, justify and prolong the histories of their most illustrious kin. We are afforded just the barest glimpses of this rich, unplumbed past. And this is the scholarly challenge: a partially revealed record of dead sovereigns and their material legacies complicated by countless conquests and coronations.

## Notes

1. 'North-Central Highlands' is used to refer to highland Huánuco, Ancash and Huamachuco. This is roughly the 'North Highlands' in Bennett's (1948) 'Peruvian Co-Tradition' framework, and distinguished from the 'Central Highlands' (Lima to Ayacucho). For colonial matters, Central Peru's sierra (Lima and Ancash, together with areas of Huánuco, Pasco and Junín) comprised part of the Archdiocese of Lima and were the crucible for the extirpation visits until ca.1750 (see Duviols 1973, 2003; Mills 1997).
2. Dates are based on calibrated ranges.
3. 'Metahuman' (also 'metaperson') is a useful term here (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 3–8), used broadly to encompass the range of agentive, nonhuman beings often understood as acting and having impact in the world, which can include divinities, spirits, oracles, numina, animals, plants, etc. Their hierarchical system *with* humans in a given society comprises a 'cosmic polity'.
4. Known in the literature as *curacazgo, señorio*, or *reino*.

5. Recent collections-based studies, with published object registers, are invaluable for Recuay iconographic study (Hohmann 2010; Wegner 2011; Cromphout 2014; Moretti 2017).
6. Recuay figural vessels required greater time investments given the rarity and higher firing temperature of kaolin clays, negative painting, and modelling (Reichert 1977; Grávalos 2024).
7. In the archive of the Parroquia Santiago Apóstol, Cabana (Alvarez 2001; Cuba 2019).
8. *Huaca* (var. *guaca, wak'a*): an embodiment of a venerable ancestral being. Notably, the divinity, its shrine and key cult images could all called 'huaca' (both as these subjects and for describing something provoking fear or awe). For more extensive coverage not possible here (see Salomon and Urioste 1991; Bray 2015; Itier 2021).
9. Census visits in the 1570s recorded 10,564 persons for Conchucos province (Cook 1977, 29).
10. Note a closeness to 'Rao' and 'Raho' for snow and icecap (Arriaga 1999, 28–29), another term used to describe illustrious ancestors embodied in mountains.
11. Relevant studies include: Chávez (1975) and Makowski (2000-2001).
12. In colonial documents, these complementary divisions were often regarded as 'Huari-Llacuaz' (var. Llactas-Llachuases) (esp. Duviols 1973; Zuidema 1973; Salomon and Urioste 1991; for archaeological resonances, see Lau 2013, Ch.4). Cuba (2018) notes, in modern folk narratives, how Pashash mediates herder (*puna*) and cultivator (valley) groups in the Cabana region.
13. Like Pariacaca and Catequil. On oviform material expressions for Pariacaca (see Chase 2015, 105–107); for Catequil (Topic 2020, 376, 379).
14. '… adoraban al Rayo, en quien representaban y consideraban tres personas …' (Hernández Príncipe 1923, 26). This also characterizes southern traditions, like the Inca.
15. This also characterizes the ethnic traditions for Pariacaca and Catequil.
16. Referring to a political structure involving hierarchical relations between all agentive beings, humans and nonhumans alike (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 2–4). See also Lau and Chicoine (2025).
17. Special children affected by such circumstances were also considered 'hijos de Rayo' in highland Ancash; some were sacrificed. Exposure to lightning strikes also predisposed people to ritual functions in colonial storm god cults (e.g. Polia 1999, 84, 164–165, 410).
18. Itier (2021, 486–487) argues that the original significance of *huaca* concerns the 'splitting-off' transformations of ancestors, manifested in the physical (lithification to stone) and metaphysical transcendence.
19. *Malqui* later became the predominant term, e.g. Arriaga [1621] (1999, 34).
20. Linked semantically to 'sign, essence, reciprocity and legacy,' an illa of herds might be a bezoar stone, while the illa of people was the ancestor mummy bundle (Salomon 2004, 116).
21. This quality, of course, has various worldwide analogues, such as halos, flaming aureoles, bright rays, and other auras endowing, often issuing

from, divine beings. In such cases, the radiant feature 'serves as the visible form of the vital life-force infused *by* the divine' (Winter 2008, 84).

22. The crested bundle design also occurs on the interior of a painted bowl (Late Recuay style), now in a private collection near Huaylas.
23. In his primordial struggle with the aboriginal telluric fire-giant Huallallo, Pariacaca 'since he was five persons began to rain down from five directions … flashing as lightning, he blazed out from five directions … ' (Salomon and Urioste 1991, 68). The omnidirectionality points to Pariacaca's power and eventual sovereignty of these lands. Other paramount divinities were characterized by five-part divisions (Gose 1996, 28).
24. Space limits a comprehensive discussion, but suffice it to say that paired buildings and mounds were a significant architectural pattern in Recuay settlements (Lau 2011, Ch.3-4). The idea of paired/opposed terraced forms is also found on *tablero* objects, probably gameboards which facilitate periodic confrontations (e.g. oppositions, sometimes ending in 'conquest') (Lau 2016, 145–148).
25. Moche potters sometimes emulated Recuay ceramic shapes and imagery (Reichert 1977).
26. Ceramic imagery shows women wearing the pins in this manner (e.g. Lau 2013, Pl.8).
27. In small village sites, like Chinchawas, Antajirka and Cajamarquilla (Cordillera Negra) (Lau 2011).

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