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Introductory Essay

Crowning affairs: sacred sovereigns in the Pre-Columbian world

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The theme of divinity and leadership has been a regular focus of archaeology, anthropology, and art history. We know of notable cases of 'divine rulership' in the ancient Americas, but broadly there has been scant synthesis. This essay introduces the aims, background and coverage of this special issue, dedicated to the theme of 'Sacred Sovereigns: Art, Divinity and Rulership in the Ancient Americas.' We revisit key thinking behind divine rulership and position the case studies and the Pre-Columbian record to more fully engage with current scholarship, including two recent works on leadership and religiosity. We postulate that most Amerindian cases of rulership have basis in cosmological hierarchies involving superhuman numina. We observe that cases of divine leadership in the ancient Americas often center on the physical record of mimesis, metaphor and monuments. These instantiate 'sacred' propositions and practices operating according to local systems of authority. The emphasis on materials is an obligatory method for studying most Pre-Columbian societies, where writing was limited. But it is also because the institution of divine leaders in the Americas relied on local understandings of cosmological difference which manifested often through physical objects and spaces.

Keywords: Social complexity; Pre-Columbian art; Latin America; First Nations; Andes; Mesoamerica; divine kingship

Prologue

In 2023, Charles III was crowned sovereign of the United Kingdom and British Commonwealth. That the UK's monarchy no longer plays an

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active role in governing its realms hardly took away from the fundamental impact of the ceremony. Indeed, the throne's retreat from explicit politics made the crowning affair more impressive: how else to explain its cultural impact and appeal for millions? One might say the desecularization of the British monarchy only heightened its sacred reach.

The coronation staged a bewildering set of rites and involved hundreds of thousands of people, processions, and marches, all with remarkable splendor. A great many others took part virtually. Its importance on the world stage manifested in its cosmopolitan makeup, with invitees from over 200 countries: armed troops from the Commonwealth nations, world politicians, and celebrities filed in to declare allegiance to the new monarch. Held in Westminster Abbey, the coronation was equally a sacred rite, authorized by the official state faith, and a display of secular wealth, pomp and tradition, a show of acceptance and witness by other heads of state and notables. In this age of lands run by warlords, the ultra-rich, and technocrats (and democracies), the recent coronation may be one of the last times we see the splendor of sacred rulership staged so unapologetically.

'Kingship' stands as 'the most common form of government known, world-wide' (Oakley 2006, 4) and 'one of the most enduring forms of human governance' (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 5). And it is notable that almost all cases are suffused with a religiosity that sacralizes rulers, and their actions and being. From small-scale societies to chieftaincies and lineage-based segmentary polities to the largest of expansionist states, archaeology should have an unequalled vantage to survey leadership institutions of the past. Not only should such arrangements leave distinctive traces. Many cultures also disseminate their beliefs and imagery about rulership through material things. Neither sovereigns nor their institutions last forever, but archaeology should be able to reveal a range of their manifestations and patterns through time.

By now, the theme of divinity and leadership has sown remarkably fertile ground for Western scholarship. Its workings have preoccupied varied disciplines and their luminaries, like Frazer (1911), Hocart (1970), Dumézil (1977), and Kantorowicz (1957). The systems in which divinely-sanctioned potentates can be found throughout the world, spanning time and space. We know of cases in the ancient Americas, but broadly there has been scant synthesis and comparative theorization, whether from the standpoint of dirt archaeology, iconography or documentary evidence (Flannery and Marcus 2012, 366).

Are there distinctive trajectories and features in the long succession of Pre-Columbian societies with sacred sovereigns? How do rulers participate in and draw power – the capacity to command and influence others – from superhuman domains? How do artworks and things

express and engage their divinity? What are the indigenous terms and conceptions for kingship and political authority? Perhaps most basic, where and when do sacred sovereigns emerge in the record? These are among the key questions that guide the contributions in this issue.

It is an opportune moment to consider anew the role of divinity and leadership in the ancient Americas. For one thing, recent world events underscore the timeliness for their study. The funerals, accessions, depositions, and abdications of powerful leaders – royal or otherwise – plainly make us think about repeat patterns between sovereigns, their ascensions and demise, and ritual constructions of their authority and presence.

Such milestones reveal the distinction of monarchs, and their fundamental relationships to people and their impacts not readily captured on the page, usually centered on ideal types and socio-political reconstructions. Even if quite distant from our case studies, these cases provide illuminating opportunities to reflect on the reception and alterity of sovereigns and their place in the world: their charisma and impact on media; their oscillating status in relation to tradition and law; and entanglements between power and militancy. We can also sense the stability and fragility of their authority and institutions.

Notably, much of the current renaissance of interest on rulership and religion draws from early anthropological sources, such as Frazer and Hocart, who focused on the ritual logic for integration and institutions in the service of effecting group prosperity. This issue provides new contributions dedicated to the theme, involving cases from around the Pre-Columbian world.[1] Our introductory essay foregrounds key debates, postulates, and the case studies in this issue to shed new light on the phenomena of divinely sanctioned leadership in the ancient Americas.

Crowning affairs: terms, antecedents, and faultlines

The theme of divinity in/and leadership (henceforth, divinity+leadership)[2] has been a regular focus of archaeology, anthropology, and art history since their inception as disciplines. No doubt this is because all peoples, regardless of place, time, complexity, or creed will have their own notions and dispositions about how others, namely other folks and other beings with whom they interact, impact their livelihood. Indeed, one might hazard that knowledge about power relations in the world gives rise to myth and ritual, on the one hand, and on the other, conditions the great range of leadership arrangements taken up to manage them. What's more, a study on monarchies recently quipped that 'once established, kings appear remarkably difficult to get rid of' (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 1). One of the principal challenges is that scholarship barely knows when and how they are established, much less why. This is a major gap.

Studying divinity+leadership is crucial because the theme involves many salient dimensions of the archaeological record. It imbricates kinship, material culture and monumentalism, gender relations and exchange, not to mention key relations with ritual practices, such as mortuary and sacrifice. Visual imagery and the arts also intervene. It is a cultural domain where great effort is expended, in life and in death, and where value in many forms is overtly accorded and extracted. The tremendous cultural production – involving time, resources, spaces, and inventions – throughout the ancient Americas demands more systematic assessment. For all these reasons, too, divinity+leadership captures the popular and scholarly imagination.

At this point, some clarifications on terminology are important. We use an open-ended understanding of 'sovereign,' taken broadly as leader or ruler.[3] The title's 'sacred sovereigns' is to recognize a range of leadership roles with basis in the sacred. By the same token, we acknowledge that this special issue is principally concerned with scholarship that is usually referred to as 'sacred kingship' or 'divine kingship.'[4] It is worth noting the androcentric focus that characterizes the antecedent literature (also Feeley-Harnik 1985, 297) and the record of historical cases. Based on a reading of the anthropological record, especially over the last five hundred years, Graeber and Sahlins (2017, 4, 400) aver, 'kings are, in virtually every known case, archetypically male.' This may be due to their role as protagonists in 'stranger-kingship' and founding ancestor narratives common to dynastic accounts. An androcentric vision also characterizes Pre-Columbian developments, especially in noble arts and narratives (Bruhns and Stothert 1999, 215; Gero 2004; Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006, 52–53; Arnold and Hastorf 2008). Still, it would be premature to restrict our discussion to only male or male-identifying leaders in deep time. Referring to divine 'sovereigns,' 'leaders' and 'rulers' is to acknowledge the gender possibilities of a vast past and an archaeological record that has only been sampled in a limited fashion.

But equally, studies are revealing, more than ever, the prominence of women in the Pre-Columbian past. Feeley-Harnik's review (1985, 298) of divine kingship in socio-cultural anthropology warned about the neglect of women's roles (e.g. as queens, queen mothers, king-makers, relic – and tomb-guardians, spirit mediums); to do so, would 'distort indigenous conceptions of political processes in which power was shared not only between royalty and commoners, living and dead, but also between men and women, whose cooperation as well as opposition in all these forms was the ultimate source of the fertile powers attributed to divine monarchy.' At least for the Pre-Columbian world, it is noteworthy that archaeology has revealed a burgeoning record of women in rulership contexts (e.g. Bruhns and Stothert 1999; Gero 1999; Joyce 2001; Miller and

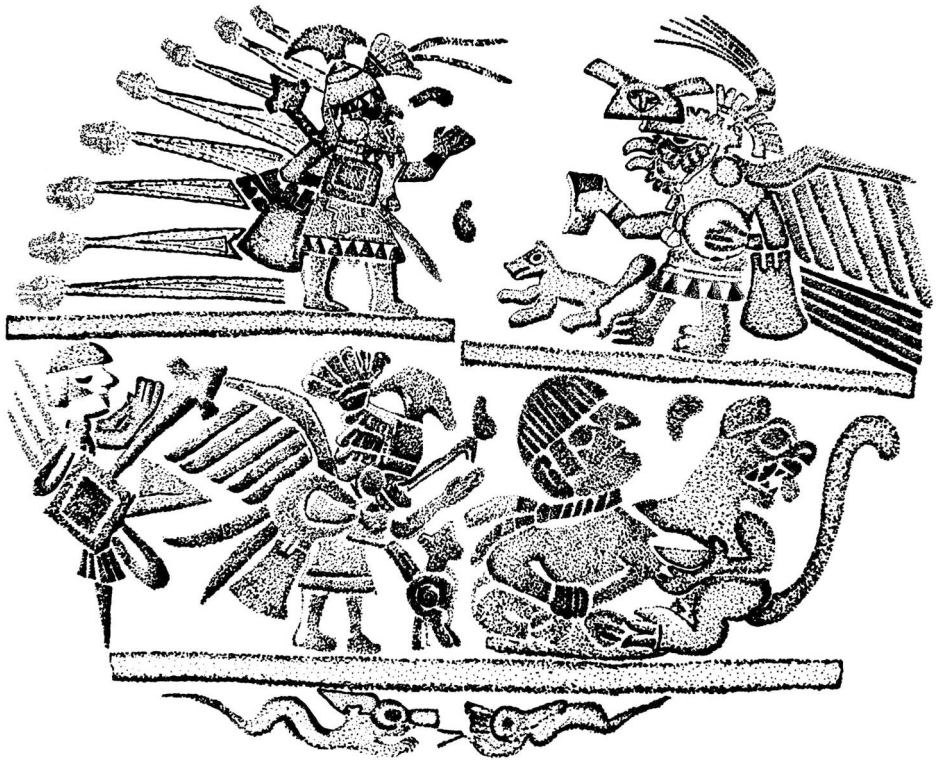

Figure 1. Low relief image of the Moche Sacrifice Ceremony, showing the protagonist, the rayed lordly figure on the top left, to be presented the blood of sacrificial victim (bottom right). (Drawing by Donna McClelland); courtesy of the Moche Archive, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection PHPC001_0046d_B, Harvard University, under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Martin 2004; Castillo and Rengifo 2008; Prządka-Giersz 2019; Giersz 2025).

Sacred or 'sacral kingship' refers to rulership grounded in sacred propositions and ritual authority. The concept emphasizes the ritual construction of rulership and textual/ritual practices that sacralize the individual and institution (Figure 1). In many ways, this probably needs no saying, since there is nary a ruler, past or present, who does not draw from ritual means to mark, distinguish, and justify their position.

All cases of sacred rulership are historically contingent and ephemeral (Brisch 2008, 8). But conventional thought often holds that the institution exemplifies a kind of stage, trait or ideal type of organization pegged to archaic states and urban societies in an evolutionary continuum. We think there are difficulties with this, both in conceptual terms and based on the present record of the ancient Americas.

One faultline about sacred sovereigns concerns their godly status. Michalowski (2008, 33) observes, 'All kings are sacred and mediate

between sacred and profane, but not all kings are gods.' This is both an ontological question having to do with the existential nature of the being of rulers, and as an experiential and historical matter of reception. These need not coincide. Is the status stable or temporary? Is it rhetorical strategy and materialized ideology? Divine status may be accorded due to a sudden transformation or claim, say an earthly, historical achievement. The heroic act may lead followers to deify sovereigns in life, and/or apotheosize them in death (as ancestors, dynastic founders, etc.). Pachacuti, Pakal, or Naram-Sin are examples of 'heroic' rulership, as individuals who were elevated to godhood by memorable feat – victory in battle, securing order, establishing a dynasty. Traditions were developed to confer to them more-than-human status. Without texts, originating inside (e.g. Classic Maya inscriptions) or reporting (e.g. Spanish eyewitness accounts) a group's traditions, it is fair to say such cases would be difficult to discern archaeologically. In their absence, the burden rests on archaeology. If the job of the system (e.g. temples, priesthoods, rituals, royal courts) is to help sustain, manifest and reify the ritual order, this should leave a substantial footprint.

'Divine kingship' is one kind of sacred kingship, whose rulers are seen ontologically as deities or divine physical incarnations. Egyptian pharaohs or Japanese emperors, for instance, occupied such an exalted existence – they are instantiations of deities. They are not 'divine' just because of rituals or protocols embedded within notions and practices of rule (e.g. the *sacral* route) or accorded the status through a heroic act. Their divinity also concerns omnipotence in life and sovereignty, often absolute, over their lands, resources and people. Inca emperors ('sons of the Sun'), for example, claimed privileged rights to hunting animals and rare metals, especially gold and silver. Graeber (in Graeber and Sahlins 2017, Ch.7) concentrates on a divine ruler's extraordinary capacity to act with impunity, for this often breaks, disregards, or transcends legal or moral norms.

Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*: *A Study in Comparative Religion* (orig. 1890) was a landmark in anthropology, written when globalization opened horizons of knowledge and evidence across all the populated continents. Colonial expeditions encountered a range of peoples and polities for comparative study and Frazer synthesized an influential treatise about rulership and its diverse manifestations. He observed that rulers were embodiments and agents of fertility, and myriad rituals were fundamental to their authority. Regicide and the sacrifice of kings as instantiations of gods were especially crucial; collectives could scapegoat rulers (e.g. to absorb the subjects' sins, evils, and deaths), live on and flourish. As high priests with their own magical powers, kings were key mediators between people and gods, and between earthly and heavenly realms (also Frankfort 1948). Frazer thus observed how sacred kingship advanced the office and its propositions:

through ritual, customs and restrictions, rulers are 'set apart' from others.

Notable follow-up was by Arthur M. Hocart (1927, [1936] 1970). Based on expertise with Polynesian and South Asian societies, he wrote on the origins of rulership and focused on ritual practices as well as the divinization associated with esteemed forebears, ancestral rulers situated at the head and dawn of a given lineage's past. He argued that political institutions, namely kingship and governments, were rooted in ritual organization (see Joyce 2025). For Hocart (1970, Ch. 8-9), kings were best theorized as 'head' priests, and so it made sense that the society's organization and ultimate aims were modeled on priests and their administration of the sacred. Religious cosmology thus serves as the charter and guidelines for perpetuating the royal office, which like Frazer before him, was ultimately interested in social cohesion by being a conduit for vitality and life.

Much scholarship, especially of post-WWII social anthropology, focused on native political systems of colonial lands, especially in Africa and South Asia (Feeley-Harnik 1985). The work discerned patterns differentiating the postholder (king) and the institution or office (kingship). The individual ruler might be sacred, but is mortal; the office, meanwhile, is divine and essential. Key practices were observed firsthand: coronation and installation rites, regicidal executions, burial ceremonies, and sacrifices served to perpetuate the office. Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), treating medieval Europe, was also heavily influential along these lines. In medieval thought, the king was seen to unite two kinds of bodies: the body natural of the individual, and the body politic comprising the monarchy, corporations, and its subjects. The former is ephemeral and can show age and failure through time. The latter, meanwhile, persists, and its health and strength, indeed immortality, are paramount. Upon the demise of the king, the body politic should pass into another body natural. Schnepel (2021) has argued for a third category of royal body, royal effigies; these mediate the twinned modalities (divine and mortal) of all divine rulers.

It is noteworthy that various cultural traditions in the ancient Americas sought to optimize the presence and memory of the dead monarch, for which we observe three common strategies or pathways, each with its own set of practices and residues. These include mimesis (e.g. images, effigies, portraits), metaphor (e.g. text and visual comparisons to divinities), and monuments (e.g. royal shrines, palaces, stelae). The various effigies (mummy bundles and *huauque* 'brother' sculptures) of Inca kings were stand-ins for them and distributed their person and vitality, both while alive and expired. The well-known Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, the burial place of the Classic Maya king K'inich Janaab Pakal I, instantiates all three ways to optimize the presence and memory of the expired

monarch. As we will see in the following pages, the pathways are not opposed or mutually exclusive; they may be complementary, interrelate, and work in synergy.

Interestingly, the Americas do not feature consistently in wider comparative studies or theorization of sacred kingship (Feeley-Harnik 1985; Oakley 2006; Brisch 2008; Moin and Strathern 2022a).[5] Perhaps Pre-Columbian cases, such as the Inca or Classic Maya, are too unique or irregular, or have uncertain fits due to evidence and methods. Regardless, this issue helps to engage the Pre-Columbian record and inform wider global understandings and comparisons.

It is worth remembering that the Western preoccupation with divine kingship was fueled by nineteenth and twentieth century colonial interventions in the Pacific, Asia, and especially Africa (Feeley-Harnik 1985; Parker 2023a). By the time professional research concentrated on the Americas, indigenous polities and practices of rulership had already seen critical changes first by conquest, disease, pacification and Christianization, and then systematic dismantling and reorganization over centuries of European-oriented forms of rule and exploitation. Plus, relevant ethnographic accounts from the Americas are much more limited.[6] The crucible of twentieth century social anthropology on political systems in Africa and the Pacific arose largely without much engagement with Americanist debates. Also, many of the questions which troubled scholars on African rulership, such as regicide, scapegoating, purity, and sacrifice of royals (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; de Heusch 1997) – seem to have had little purchase in Amerindian cases.

Long embroiled in debates about political centralization and the accumulation of resources, more recent anthropological study of cross-cultural complexity has seen a renewed emphasis on the ritual basis of monarchy (de Heusch 1997; Graeber and Sahlins 2017; Schnepel 2021; Parker 2023a). For example, Parker (2023b, 24) observes, '… conquest and coercion are now seen as probably less important in the history of kingship in Africa than creativity and consent. As often as not, dynastic power sought legitimacy by rooting itself within deep-seated understandings of the world and cosmos, and by positioning the king as arbiter of sacred authority.' Such characterization follows broader, renewed favor on the cosmological underpinnings of polities and dynastic institutions worldwide (Puett 2002; Oakley 2006; Moin and Strathern 2022a; Berger 2023).[7] Increasing receptivity to native understandings about social organization has resulted, in part, from the recognition of epistemological deficiencies in classical Western political philosophy, particularly those presuming oppositions between the religious and the political, church and state, and the human and divine. We are reminded that the rise of the modern study of non-Western systems burgeoned and was

defended, sometimes dogmatically, by agents and thinkers working under a secularized aegis (Oakley 2006, 4–8; Moin and Strathern 2022b, xi).

But in addition, the ontological turn, especially, has been crucial for illuminating the impact of nonhumans on social relations, not least the political (e.g. Gell 1998; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Ingold 2000; Descola 2006). Most fundamentally, studies on the agentive capacities of nonhumans (e.g. deities, spirits, the dead, animals, plants, objects) across social life have led to reassessments in various key fields: polity (Graeber and Sahlins 2017; and see below), authority (Kolata 2003; Kosiba, Janusek, and Cummins 2020) and divinity itself (Houston 2014; Bray 2015), not to mention landscape (Jennings and Swenson 2018) and forms of making (Halperin et al. 2009). The animate forces that vitalize and empower special people, places and things are especially critical (Kosiba, Janusek, and Cummins 2020; Joyce 2025). What's more, indigenous reckoning of the world needs to be taken seriously for appreciating the voices of communities in postcolonial contexts (e.g. de la Cadena 2015; Berger 2023).

It follows that the most salient commonality of all the contributions of this issue is the embrace of cosmology as a source, if not *the* source, of political authority and legitimacy in the ancient Americas. Once consigned to a passive notion of worldview or as elite ideology masking economic relations and exploitation, ritual cosmology comes to the forefront. And rather than being epiphenomenal to social complexity and culture change, it is becoming clear that the 'sacred' of sovereigns is fundamental.

A distinctive, and widespread, strategy of leadership authority in the Pre-Columbian world was its emphasis on gaining and maintaining the loyalty of subjects. Recruitment could be by practices of gift-giving, conspicuous display, performance, and generosity. Perhaps the most iconic form of state ceremony in the ancient Andes was to feast together. By offering abundant food and drink, hosts indebted participants for a future return, garnering tribute, goods, but most importantly, the labor obligations and loyalties of provincial subjects and communities (Murra 1980; Bray 2003).

In this way, leadership turned on a 'political economy of social subjugation rather than material coercion' (Sahlins, in Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 348). For the ancient Americas, it is worth remembering that standardized currency was either unknown or relatively minor compared to systems of money in the Old World. Rare materials (e.g. metals, rare stones, shells, pigments) were nevertheless crucial to Native American groups, especially for differentiating those in and with authority. Such preciosities trafficked in cosmological power to denote having subjects ('wealth in people,' Ramírez 2005) and special access to the divine (Helms 1993, 1998). Perhaps the most famous of all Pre-Columbian religious practices, the well-known sacrificial ceremonies on the Aztec

Templo Mayor, celebrated the annual round but also key moments in the reigns of supreme *tlatoque* rulers. Tremendous offerings of precious stuff – live humans and other valuables – from around the realm epitomized, on a public scale, the sacred transactions and obligations linking rulers, people and the gods (Carrasco 1999; Lopez Luján 2005).

The importance of mutual 'feeding' in creating and maintaining society manifests across many Amerindian contexts (e.g. Overing 1989; Ramírez 2005; Ardren 2016) and has diverse global comparisons (Feeley-Harnik 1985, 288–289). The ruler integrates (or articulates) people, beings and the powers of other realms, thus constituting the office's sacred and *moral* responsibility (Hocart 1970). Such relations comprise what Marcel Mauss (1967) called a 'gift economy' involving entire groups and communities; one prestation anticipated a return gesture, regardless of how the counter-gift was constituted.

Art Joyce (2025) observes how a sacred 'covenant' between humans and gods was crucial for the rise of early polities in Eastern Mesoamerica and the Mexican Highlands. He finds that divine rulership emerged with the maize god as a principal protagonist and model. Like Frazer or Hocart might predict, the institution emerged out of an earlier, deep-seated tradition, which entreated divinities through sacrificial offerings to release flows of vitality crucial for agricultural success and prosperity. Commoners occupied one pole of a continuum serving the sacred covenant, and rulers arose to take up a position on the other, and would increasingly centralize its workings by the Middle Formative. This draws attention to inherent tensions, 'a continual chess game' between sacralizing and divinizing tendencies, as Graeber and Sahlins (2017, 8) note, 'in which the king and his partisans attempt to increase the divinity of the king, and the popular factions attempt to increase his sacralization.' Put another way, even common sacral systems (say, of ancestor veneration and lineage heads) already hold the seeds for more consolidated, divinizing developments (for the Andes, see Lau and Luján 2025).

In sum, sacred and ritual propositions underpin traditions of leadership across the ancient Americas. It would be incorrect, however, to imagine power relations and religious institutions as constant, monolithic, or invariable, in space or through time. More data and contexts should illuminate the record of divinity+leadership synchronically within polities and through time.

New regnal concerns

The wider literature on divinity and rulership has seen notable interventions in recent years, with implications for developments in the ancient Americas. These include *On Kings* (2017) which compiled essays by the

late anthropologists David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins. Another concerns *Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence* (Moin and Strathern 2022a), an edited volume by the historians A. Afzar Moin and Alan Strathern (see also Moin 2012; Strathern 2019). This section outlines their key contentions and their relevance to this issue.

Both offer ambitious models steeped in the comparative method, with worldwide coverage. They are grounded in anthropology and history, but both works also emphasize time depth, especially cases illuminated by historical information. Notwithstanding, there is not much theorization of prehistoric cases, and considerations of processual and diachronic change for deep time are generally sidelined.[8] We think archaeology and the case studies in this issue offer the opportunity to test their concepts and enhance a long-term picture.

First, *On Kings*. One of its central tenets is that societies always feature hierarchical structures, even when they are seen as small-scale, egalitarian and acephalous. This is because all societies have their systems of 'metapersons' who rule the top tiers of the cosmos. Metapersons are any agentive being (e.g. gods, celestials, ancestors, oracles, species-masters, spirits, demons, animals, plants) who act, ultimately, as the principal arbiters 'setting the terms and conditions' of life. These beings impact the harvests, medicine, knowledge, rains, favor, war, fertility, death, etc. Divinity may also be immanent across beings, and following Frazer and Hocart, kings, as central priests, are the most impactful practitioners in the ritual domain. Claims to divine power have been the '*raison d'être* of political power throughout the greater part of human history' (Sahlins, in Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 36, 60).

On Kings also insists on the idea of 'cosmic polity' – the social arrangement comprised by the entirety of relations between humans and metapersons within a given social system. The crucial form of sovereign authority in a cosmic polity is held by various numina: ancestors, spirits, and deities. Hence even so-called egalitarian peoples might be 'subjects of a cosmic system of social domination.' This arrangement always implies social differentiation, and a suite of ongoing practices (namely, rituals) that entreat and engage powerful metapersons crucial for the polity's livelihood. If the question then becomes where did the primordial hierarchy arise, Sahlins (2022, 40) insinuates two scenarios: the first is diffusionary, which imports the model of hierarchy from a royal regime elsewhere; the second is autochthonous invention, modeled on descent reckoning according status to ancestors, elders and parents (also Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 3). For Sahlins (2022, 32–33, 36), the cosmic polity of any society is the 'original political society', where 'there are kings in heaven, even where there are no chiefs on earth' (see also Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 60).

On Kings is mainly a comparative anthropology of non-Western societies. Meanwhile, *Sacred Kingship in World History* treats religious and political history set over the *longue durée*. In it, Moin and Strathern (2022b) propose two opposing modes[9] of religious thought and practice: 'immanentism' and 'transcendentalism.'

Immanentism engages the world as a social whole, with people and divinities in constant interrelation, with little or no essential emic distinction between ritual and politics. Both serve the interests of group prosperity in perpetuity. Chiefs and monarchs are at the head of the ritual system and networks which ensure collective welfare (e.g. success in crops, herds, fertility, rain). By obligation, rulers in such systems are the gods' earthly manifestations, and also their main (priestly) officiants. Their charge is not necessarily to govern, as much as it is to access and administer the powers of fertility and livelihood for their followers. Thus, rulers in immanentist groups can be seen as 'enchanted,' as having extraordinary powers over the world (Moin and Strathern 2022a). The immanentist tendency describes many non-Western religions, including those of expansive polities. They also describe the myriad 'traditional' and non-Western societies usually studied by anthropologists, including of the indigenous Americas.

Crucially, the mosaic of immanentist religions and peoples in Europe and Asia saw major changes during the 1st millennium BCE, sometimes called the 'Axial Age' (Strathern 2019). This time witnessed the appearance and spread of the world's major scriptural religions, which exemplify the transcendentalist tendency. Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity are religions founded on the doctrines of sacred books, and characterized by imperatives of truth and salvation, at times sparking the repudiation and occlusion of other faiths. In this way, transcendentalism might be viewed as a fervent reaction toward immanentism.

Just as important, transcendental religions conceptualize(d) their doctrines and grew their organizations to break off from the secular and the political. Among the many changes, sovereigns no longer comprised the head priests of the ritual system, nor were expected to be responsible for the common welfare. The money economy, merchant classes, Iron Age weaponry and democratic forms of writing, all ascendant during the Axial Age, seem to have been crucial as conditions or engines for the uptake of transcendentalist religions (Moin and Strathern 2022c, 328).

At their core are the soteriological truths for achieving salvation. Immanentism rarely seeks to profess truths nor pushes ideals (e.g. being good, humble, righteous) on others – commonly, through conversion. Rather, what immanentist religions hold dear is the common livelihood and order. By contrast, '[i]n transcendentalism, the point became to escape the human condition rather than to ameliorate it' (Moin and Strathern 2022b, 10).

Finally, transcendentalist religions tolerate the institution of sacred rulership and develop modes to moderate its authority. One of the key ways is to separate the domain of politics from that of religion, and to codify laws and morals as notionally independent of rulership. Priesthoods and scriptures are fundamental, as they mediate the authority of monarchies. The king is successful ('righteous') by adhering to and/or defending their tenets. State councils and governments are another course. The 'secularization' or 'disenchantment' of rulership keys the transcendentalist move, where 'the enchanted worldview is no longer the basis of a universal political order' (Moin and Strathern 2022a, 337).

We believe these two recent syntheses offer innovative ways to meaningfully engage the Pre-Columbian record. The first is the notion of cosmic polity, which serves effectively to desecularize the consideration of complexity, since it questions any firm boundary between religion and politics (see also Moin and Strathern 2022a, xi). In cosmic polities, according to Sahlins, rulers are priests, gods are rulers, and ritual governs the socio-political world; hierarchy is universal (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, Ch.1). If so, students of the past and the material record will need to build capacity to distinguish relevant forms and diachronic patterns of such polities in the future. Serious consideration of the question of cosmic polity will need to turn to various forms of evidence and re-frame social relations and differentiation; critical consideration of mimesis, metaphor and monuments will almost certainly at play.

Given their ubiquity and footprint, funerary cults and royal shrines, we suspect, will be some of the crucial indicators of cosmic polities, or parts thereof. The veneration of progenitors (ancestors) is fundamental to authority and social memory across many groups across the Americas (Zuidema 1973; McAnany 1995; Isbell 1997). These comprise ritual domains which divinize and venerate esteemed deceased; founding ancestors are especially important as the dawning figures of noble lineages and dynasties, because they legitimate power structures, succession, and inheritance in kin-based societies (e.g, in this issue, see Chinchilla Mazariegos 2025; Lau and Luján 2025)). As Pillsbury (2025) shows for the late Pre-Columbian north coast polities of Peru, festive generosity bound the dead to the living. Such conspicuous exchange was about performance, display and veneration – to celebrate and literally elevate those with divine status. Marked by the use of fine regalia, vessels and litters, engaging with the dead obliged them to the world of the living (see also Giersz 2025). Such practices legitimized noble privileges and directed ancestral favor to the group, while inculcating time-honored attention given by living generations to their most treasured metapersons.

The immanentist/transcendentalist dichotomy presents both scholarly challenges and promise. This is not merely recognition of the mode of religiosity since all Pre-Columbian traditions are notionally immanentist.

What is more interesting concerns how we diagnose variability and culture change in manifestations of immanentist religiosity (see also Joyce 2025). The course of human history after the Axial Age shows tensions and conflict between transcendentalist and immanentist modes, precisely at the times and location of inter-cultural encounters. Despite its emphasis on truths and converting non-believers, transcendentalism's searching project is never complete, and coexistence and hybrid forms are the norm. Even as it expands, transcendentalist religiosity may embed and benefit from immanentist aspects in the process (Moin and Strathern 2022b, 13). Gose (2022) clarifies immanentism in late prehispanic Andean rulership, observing that it varied before and during the Inca period, in and outside its core, as hegemonic strategies within a continuum. The tensions within and between religious modes, each with its own custom approach to sacred kingship, may ultimately help frame and model the dynamics of ancient encounters, and resulting transformations, especially for regional ethnic groups operating with different cosmological regimes.

The other key relevance concerns the distinctions between kinds of rulership (Moin and Strathern 2022b, 14–16). In the immanentist mode, kings are divinized, 'treated as a metaperson,' by dint of their association or their descent from gods; divinization is by two routes: heroic and cosmic.[10] The heroic course sees rulers acquiring divine sanction and status through their individual accomplishments (e.g. in battles, in founding groups and settlements); in the cosmic route, the status is conveyed through ritual performance, and playing the (repeat) role of protagonist in mythic structures (see, for example, Chinchilla Mazariegos 2025; Lau and Luján 2025). The routes are themselves characterized by varying stability and may reflect changes in a given institution: the heroic form associated with dynastic founders, and the cosmic route for smooth reception of successors. This dichotomy may have significant implications for archaeological cases.

It is worth noting that neither *On Kings* nor *Sacred Kingship in World History*, despite their global comparisons and time-depth, weighs in much on the role of the environment, in synchronic space or through time. Production, adaptation, and landscape are generally seen as homogenous and constant.[11] Specific human-environment relations and change do not figure much in their accounts and models of sacred rulership.

Clearly, many dimensions of the environment and its variability for human involvement may have been important, given the impact of landscape, resources, economies, settlement systems, climate, or their short and long-term alterations. For example, Bourget (2015, 2016) has previously detailed the role of Moche rulers and nobles as the mythic protagonists in blood sacrifice rites, held to respond to El Niño catastrophes in north coastal Peru, ca. 400–800 CE. As the arbiters of land and fertility,

rulers offered the blood of enemy captives to appease the gods and restore the land's (and sea's) order and abundance. Distinct environments must have had direct bearing on the kinds of metapersons seen as powerful and especially those with whom mortals drew divine justification and accords (see Joyce 2025). It will be instructive for archaeology and related fields interested in past environments and climate to help fill in these gaps and enhance reconstructions of 'cosmic polities' and 'immanentism' in the ancient Americas.

Framing 'sacred sovereigns:' coverage and cases

This special issue is able to cover only a slice of the regnal variability evident in the Pre-Columbian Americas (Quilter and Miller 2006), but still we are introduced to different methods, kinds of data, and heuristic models. While the ancient Maya are illuminated by monuments and inscriptions developed indigenously (Houston and Stuart 1996; Martin 2020; also this issue, Chinchilla Mazariegos 2025), the study of rulership at the time of the Spanish conquest very often turns to the early Spanish chronicles (e.g., Gillespie 1989; Carrasco 1999; Ramírez 2005; Gose 2008; Herring 2015; Ossio 2020; see also Baquedano and Berdan 2025). Difficulties of language and translation confront both corpuses of evidence.

Investigations of most pre-Conquest cultures, meanwhile, will resort to archaeological things and patterning, and the imagery of rulership, when available. It is worth remembering that the archaeological record fossilizes a different, usually much slower, register of cultural process than the seasonal and annual tempos afforded by ethnography, or the dynastic events and cycles of ritual seen via ancient Maya monuments and their inscriptions (Martin 2020). Archaeological residues, both uncommon and quotidian, build up incrementally and frequently over generations or longer, and oblige distinct methods of detection and critical examination (Swenson and Roddick 2018). Relevant imagery, meanwhile, also works on a different temporal register too: among other things, it is subject to rhetoric and artistic choices, themselves indebted to but also responding to prevailing dispositions of the dynasts, courts and/or their descendant communities (see Pillsbury 2025).

Historical information and comparisons feature prominently in this issue. Baquedano and Berdan (2025) focus on early eyewitness accounts and Spanish chronicles to assess the representation of the Aztec ruler, Moctezuma. Other studies cite the worldview of modern groups to model older developments, including the rise of divine leaders (Joyce 2025). Lau and Luján (2025) draw from Peru's colonial extirpation of idolatries literature (principally, of the late sixteenth to seventeenth centuries) to show how central Peruvian highlanders of the early first

millennium CE began to associate their lords and lineage ancestors with storm gods.

Of course, the ancient Maya cultivated their own writing system, largely to render a 'patrimonial rhetoric' (Martin 2020, 54, 59–64), focused on elite ritual practices, chronologies and royal biographies. The inscriptions are meaningful not least because they accompany and contextualize images of human and godly persons. If maize gods may be the best known of divine figures associated with Maya rulers (e.g. Schele and Miller 1986; Fields and Reents-Budet 2005; Freidel 2008; Taube et al. 2010), Chinchilla Mazariegos (2025) delves into other divine 'affiliations,' including the celestial deity, Ik' Chuwaaj, the Itzamnaaj bird god, and the Sun God. Having the qualities of deities implied that the rulers shared their strengths, vulnerabilities, and even their destinies. One sees a personal connection, apparently biographically contingent and variable, like the favor shown by Homeric gods to individual Greek polis heroes. The role of sacrifice/death of divinities (early in the ruler's reign) during installation rituals is important, not least because of similar practices in Aztec contexts (Baquedano and Berdan 2025). One is also reminded of Hocart's proposal (1927, Ch. VII) that, in accession rituals, the heir must symbolically die (tested, sacrificed) for the ruler to be crowned (reborn triumphantly and consecrated).

The documentary record of the ancient Maya is extraordinary. For most Pre-Columbian cultures, we lack comparable evidence of formal titles/epithets and deictic considerations, much less the biographical information, that denote the divine status and historical trajectories of rulers. Where writing systems are unknown, a greater burden is, by obligation, on the wider material record.

The study of chiefly polities is fundamental in this regard (e.g. Earle 2002; Flannery and Marcus 2012). The concept of chiefdom has been especially influential for the study of Circum-Caribbean and Isthmo-Colombian groups (Steward 1948; McEwan and Hoopes 2021). Traditionally, processual models have considered 'chiefdoms' as an intermediary stage and arrangement between decentralized tribes and centralized states, as 'diminutive forms of kingdoms lacking kings, complex polities lacking armies and sitting bureaucracies of states' (Barker 2008, 515). Seen typologically as the 'precursor to the state' (Carneiro 1981), studies aim to detect variability in their scale, settlement patterns, material culture, and other archaeological correlates (e.g. Drennan and Uribe 1987; Redmond 1998).

In recent decades, the archaeology of chiefdoms has come under intense scrutiny (Pauketat 2007). This special issue makes no pretense of rehearsing those discontents. Suffice it to say here, however, that it is difficult to avoid the wide relevance of the term 'chief' (or cognates meaning group/lineage head, leader, or principal within a class) found

in so many native languages and traditions of the Americas. It is precisely in the semantic domain of 'chiefly leader,' untethered from straitjacketing levels of organizational types, that often illuminates the cross-cultural salience of 'leaders': to wit, in native categories like *cacique, kuraka, tlatoani,* and *ajaw* (e.g. Houston and Stuart 1996; Oliver 2009; Itier 2023). Many Amerindian groups conceive(d) of these persons as 'chiefly,' not only in forms of address but also because they were specifically invested with (or susceptible to) special forces, talents, and expectations which distinguished them from commoners. Scalar authority was pegged to differential access, but not, or not essentially, as material accumulation; rather, it was special access to knowledge and cosmological relations and resources (not available to others) deemed important for authority and directed to special actions – for success in collective pursuits like agriculture, ritual and war, to sustain loyalties, settle disputes, etc. In this way, there may be functional continuities in divinity+leadership at, and potentially regardless of, various levels of complexity.

On kings and things: making sovereigns and the matter of difference

In addition to the structures and institutions involving sacred sovereigns, this issue helps us to consider the relevance of material culture in past projects of divine rulership. Without widespread forms of currency, intensive transport or writing/literacy, there is good reason to think that Pre-Columbian peoples would emphasize visual arts and monumental constructions to bear some of the burden in communicating the legitimacy and sacred propositions of their rulers (Kosiba, Janusek, and Cummins 2020). Again we stress the common interplay of mimesis, metaphor and monuments.

The imagery of potentates, of course, has long been a touchstone for the study of rulership and complexity around the world (e.g. Frankfort 1948; Proskouriakoff 1950; Winter 2009). Salient Pre-Columbian depictions – comprised mainly of portraits, effigies and architectural monuments – are at varying degrees of likeness and scale (e.g. Guernsey 2006; Halperin et al. 2009; O'Neil 2012; Hamilton 2018). All these forms hold semiotic capacities and affordances. By the same token, given common Amerindian dispositions toward 'sacred matter' (Houston 2014; Kosiba, Janusek, and Cummins 2020), aniconic forms and fragmentary bits may have been just as effective and prominent as sovereign images in Pre-Columbian traditions. Standing stones, skulls and bones, face-neck jars, cloth bundles, pebbles – all may have a basis in the divine and can enliven and empower the imagery of sovereigns in the ancient Americas. Many objects can serve as potential extensions of the royal person and office. Indeed, for some, what are images but ways to interact tangibly with the numinous (e.g. Freedberg 1989, Ch. 2; Gell 1998, ch. 7)?

Among the other prominent material diagnostics are royal tombs and palaces (Evans and Pillsbury 2004; Christie and Sarro 2006); finely made items and preciosities from long-distance also feature (Helms 1993, 1998). Stone monuments are critical, since they often materialize the places and enduring qualities of gods and sovereigns (Guernsey 2006; Dean 2010; Bassett 2015; Lau 2008, 2016; Hamilton 2018). Royal spectacle and extraordinary ritual occasions are of strong relation (Tambiah 1977; Geertz 1980), and in the Americas usually manifested in state generosity (Kolata 2003; Ramírez 2005; Bray 2017), performance (Inomata 2006; Looper 2009) and conspicuous offerings of people and things, often in mortuary (Millaire 2002; Lopez Luján 2005; Sugiyama 2005; Bourget 2016). These are kinds of giftly transactions trafficking in valuables and reciprocal obligations. Privileged spaces for live and dead royals often indicate greater sheer cultural effort and elevated social status; related 'diagnostics' of sovereigns include special objects of office or iconic practices, like thrones or transport by litters (Figure 2) (also Pillsbury 2025). Some of the earliest Andean vessels which depict this practice, we think, coincided with the rise of leaders divinized as ancestor figures (see Lau and Luján 2025).

Landscapes may also feature prominently as part of a ruler's transcendence. To wit: 'forest of kings'; a cordillera of ancestors, and mountain-shaped mausolea; watery caves and lakes; islands for transport and sacrifice. All these feature in the prerogatives of divinity+leadership (Schele and Freidel 1990; Townsend 1992; Jennings and Swenson 2018; Joyce 2025). Substances (ingested, worn, gifted, sacrificed) and colors are also key domains of royalty and practice of sacred kingship, in life and in death (Schele and Miller 1986; Houston et al. 2009; Dupey García 2015; Pillsbury 2017). Materials are essential for effecting how sacred rulers were experienced; for they often privileged distinct sensory affordances, powers and symbolic associations to the bodies of sovereigns (Houston and Cummins 2004; Herring 2015).

If such associations are critical in the operations of ideology, political legitimation, and memory, our outlook might see artworks and big monuments as helping to drive the system. They might work as the crucial social media and agents in creating and maintaining social relations. Take, for instance, Classic Maya palaces and the histories and cultural elaboration bound up in them. Part home, tomb-temple-shrine, museum, family album, and entertainment complex, they are much more than merely places for courtly life and dynamics (Houston and Cummins 2004; Miller and Martin 2004; Christie and Sarro 2006). Once established, they underwrote and framed entire domains of behaviors for dynasts and their collectives.

Paradoxically, while rulers keep one foot inside the palace, they often have the other outside, and very often beyond still. Sacred sovereigns

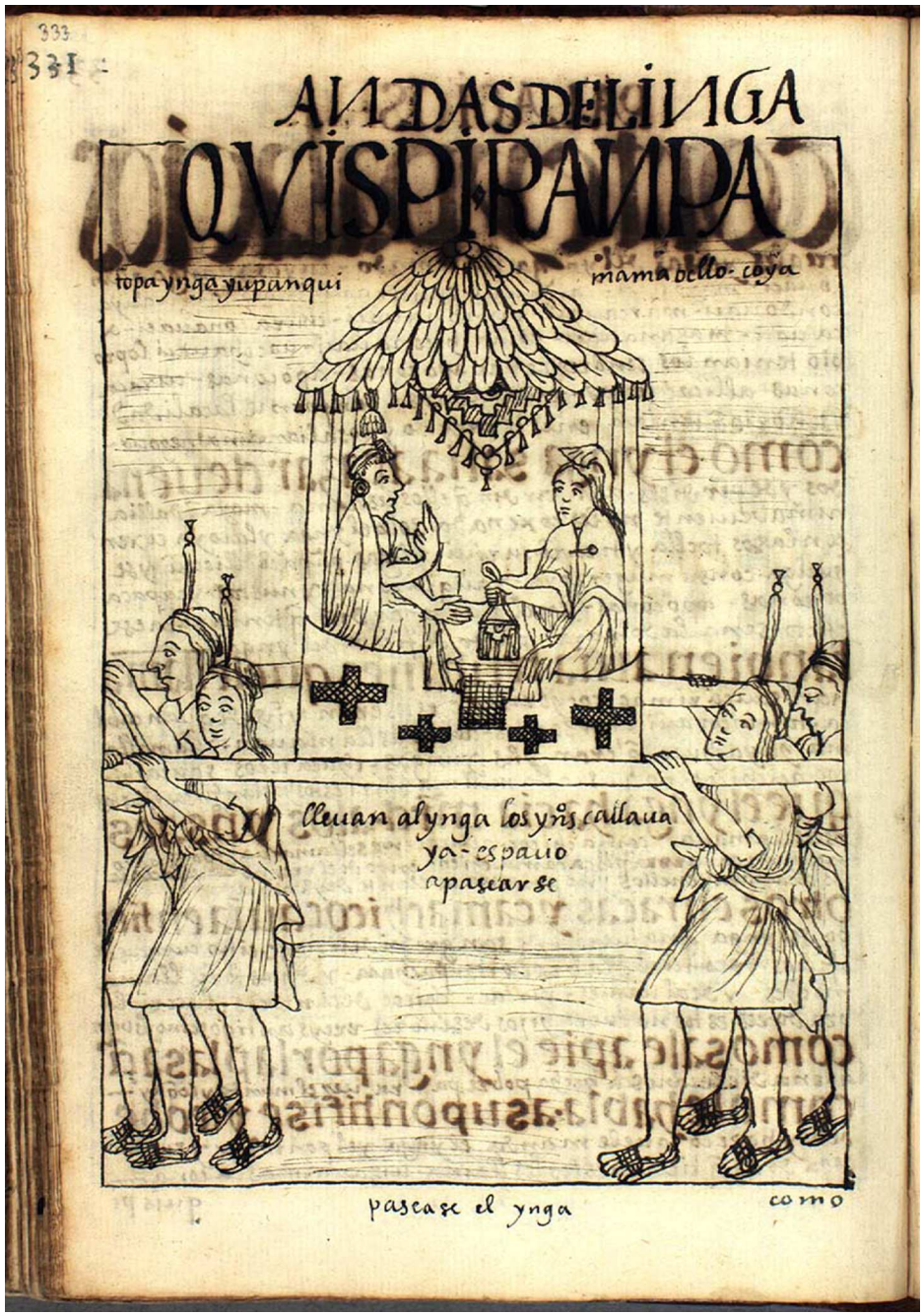

Figure 2. Guaman Poma de Ayala, The litter (named 'Quispe Ranpa') of the Inca king, Topa Ynga Yupanqui, sat next to Mama Ocllo (queen), and carried by four attendants; from *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1615), folio 333. (Gl. kgl. S. 2232, 4°; image courtesy of Det Kgl. Bibliotek, Copenhagen).

may need to 'stand outside society,' for all rulers are fundamentally different than others (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 70). Royal practices and things, 'artworks,' help effect the differentiation. As crucial media internal to the society, it is through objects that the ruler's alterity can feature prominently (e.g. 'stranger' differentially 'wealthy' or imbued) (see Giersz 2025); differently enabled or embodied (e.g. rainmakers, skilled in war); capable of transgressive acts (e.g. incest, murder, contra laws and customs). The media mediate and multiply their presences and expressions in time and space (Cummins 2007).

Paramount to their Otherness is their relationship to other gods, including ancestors (Helms 1998). Rulers not only often seek their patronage, assistance, protection and information (Gose 1996). They make claims about their own divinity, or wear attire, have emblems of the realm and objects of office. In their imagery, they are treated pictorially to look and act like gods, taking up their form, gestures, visages and compositional arrangements (Houston and Stuart 1996; Winter 2008; Looper 2009; Baquedano and Berdan 2025).

Rulers are modeled on supreme beings, and their power may draw on their privileged access to them as intermediaries and periodic instantiations. Rulers may be seen as their progeny, and thus emphasize their line and inheritance. The ruler wields and channels supernatural powers by being an earthly representative of divinity. They can conjure and communicate with gods, who lord over rulers and witness their doings. As Chinchilla Mazariegos (2025) reveals, using divine models for ancient Maya royals may also concern their fallibility, imperfections and preordainments. Perhaps emphasizing the divinity of dynasts only dramatizes their heightened and ill-fated humanity.

Scholarly interest in the sovereign's body, and distributed body and personhood, are particularly topical (Houston and Cummins 2004; Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006; Fitzsimmons 2009; O'Neil 2012; Wilkinson 2013; Bray 2017; Hamilton 2018). The topic is indebted to Frazer's pioneering discussion of practices surrounding sovereigns as a 'dying god,' whose physical condition acted like a mirror for all to see and compare with the prosperity of the realm and the collective. Hocart (1927) identified a long, formulaic sequence of steps in installation ceremonies across the world – a global recipe to construct and adorn a legitimate royal body. All this, Hocart (1927, 70) theorized, was to facilitate the necessary transformation: the death → and rebirth (of the heir/king) → as a god. Luc de Heusch (1997) also championed the role of installation ceremonies, specifically in sacralizing and empowering the royal physical person as a living 'body-fetish,' a magical instrument that combined with material, substances, symbolism and potential. The royal body is often subjectified for public intentions (e.g. scapegoating, sacrifice).

King Charles III's coronation also reminds us how a sovereign is also a living object, an innovation even within an invented tradition. All rulers are to an extent invented and experienced, even if for only a short while. Their personhood is articulated through others: heirs and royal family, courtiers, soldiers, and other sovereigns. With a souvenir or a snapshot, adherents acquire a cherished piece of the ruler (and vice versa), like a relic (Hooper 2014). Such items are extensions of sovereigns, as are portraits, coins and royal attire, not to mention palaces, monuments and effigies. Multiplying their image is to amplify and extend their presence to places where they cannot be in person. Indeed, part of their power derives from an ambiguity, the paradox of how to presence their sovereign bodies for others. They expire, but often (need to) carry on (Houston and Stuart 1996, 289). They may have extraordinary powers of vision and provision, but they are set apart from humanity, often physically inaccessible and hidden purposively from view – another mediation of their presence (e.g. see Herring 2015, Ch.2).

In this vein, it may be useful to consider Alfred Gell's now classic discussion of idols (Gell 1998, Ch. 7), and how they are seen and made to be potent, agentive and distributed. In this case, we would argue that the kingly ruler is no less an idol, the literal focus of cult and veneration within a nexus of social relations. For us, what's critical (given the archaeological concern for traces and sampling) is not merely the easy imputation of idolhood or agency, but the patterned acts of consecration and practice that make the cult object (here, the ruler) sacred and transcendent. Gell notes that idol-making across the world parses out into two kinds of consecrative strategies centered on the body. The internalist strategy emphasizes the idol's internal power and capacities (to sense, to be alive, to speak and convey, etc.); Gell's discussion of *darshan* is crucial here, for the internal power of the Hindu god is manifest through visual exchange: worshippers sees themselves being seen by the god idol, and vice versa. The chest cavities or compartments of Teotihuacan human effigies received substances and other objects that vitalized them. The great care given to inlaying the eyes of masks for Andean mummy bundles, sometimes with projecting rays, conveys the same internal potency to strike those who dare to behold visually. Effigy vessels commonly contained ritual drink, an enlivening fluid likened to water and rain, semen and blood (Weismantel 2021).

The externalist strategy, happily, also may leave a material trail. If Gell's ruse is to accord vitality to inanimate things, there's no need here with the still breathing King Charles III. Throughout the coronation, the heir might as well be inanimate: for most of the time he just sits there, already a portrait, not unlike the Early Classic Maya coronation scene at San Bartolo (Taube et al. 2010). There is something similar to accessioning and the idea of seated presiding in modeled clay representations of Wari-Recuay groups of the high Andes (Lau 2013, Pl. 29): two officiants

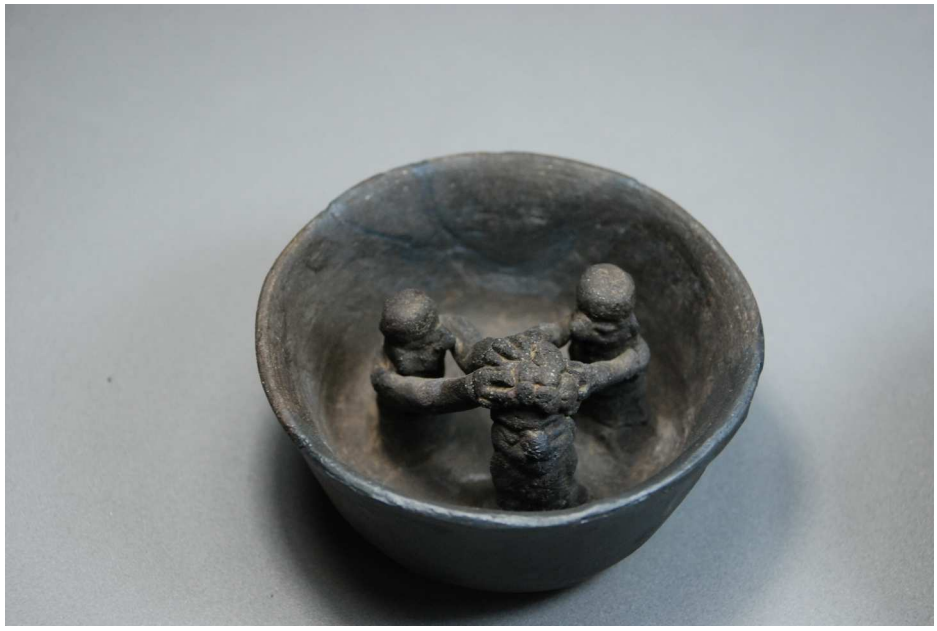

Figure 3. Photo of small vessel with figures putting headdress on mummy bundle (or carved stone effigy?), the act of enshrining an ancestor effigy. Part of cache with two other identical vessels, and other miniature sets excavated at Ichik Wilkawain, highland Peru, ca. AD 700-900 (Photo courtesy of Juan Paredes).

place a headdress on a seated figure (Figure 3). This crowning affair is not on a live human, but an expired mummy; the makers apparently conveyed the iconic moment of being installed as an enshrined ancestor. In Gell's externalist strategy, this would be the stuff that happens around the 'index' which makes and empowers its as a person: the congregations and progresses; disrobing; anointing with oil; piling on of special clothing; bequeathing of weapons, jewels and other gifts; prayers, pledges and naming by others; etc. There is also the iconic crowning itself. Put another way, such external activities are about the subjectification of object-persons, whether of idols, artworks or crowned rulers.

And the internalist strategy for Charles III? This should be noted, even if self-evident. It is the blood of his mother and former sovereign, Queen Elizabeth II, which runs through him to legitimate his being and claim. Here, then, we see the dual reliance on royal ancestry/bloodline and the witness and sanction of the polity's divinity. Internalist and externalist strategies for legitimating rulers should be very common and should also have discernible manifestations in the ancient past. The study of divine rulership in the ancient Americas therefore serves also as a referendum to help rethink the archaeological record of materiality in social complexity.

Some working postulates

To help inform the reader's engagement with this issue's case studies, we offer some working points underpinning our consideration of 'sacred sovereigns' in the ancient Americas. First, the institution of divine rulership was a prominent mode of social organization across the ancient Americas. Apparently, it was an effective solution to manage groups and their livelihood, shaped equally by local environments and collective dispositions towards what constituted authority. In these arrangements, the relations between rulers and their people often centered on sacred propositions, and authority operated according to local rules and tolerances. Ritual practices and relations helped integrate the polity. All Amerindian cases of sacred 'sovereigns' will have basis in cosmological hierarchies privileging superhuman numina.

Second, divinely sanctioned leadership was adaptable and apparently grafted onto local environmental and economic contexts opportunistically. The case studies in this issue cover a diverse range of environments in the New World; if nothing else, it reveals no single ecological condition nor geographic or economic orientation requisite for the rise of divinely sanctioned rulers. Societies flourished across its lush rainforests, mountainous highlands, riverine basins, and coastal strips, and in many humid and desertic habitats in between. These provisioned access to land, water, and other resources fundamental for social life and reproduction.

Third, we see myriad kinds of divine prototypes, metaphors and sanction for earthly rulers. Probably the iconic one relates to the sun, such as of the Aztec (Gillespie 1989), Inca (Ramírez 2005; Makowski 2010) and Natchez (Graeber and Sahlins 2017).[12] But rulers also embodied/identified with divinities of maize (Taube 1996; Estrada-Belli 2006), the moon (Makowski 2001, 2008), thunder and lightning (Staller and Stross 2013; Lau and Luján 2025), of the sea (Makowski 2000; Millones 2013), of the storm and rains (Pauketat 2023), lakes and mountains (Rostworowski de Diez Canseco 1988), not to mention various zoomorphic beings (Miller and Taube 1993; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2025). Esteemed progenitors (ancestors) were probably the most common form of 'metaperson,' and ancestor cults almost certainly provided a working template for dynastic reckoning and making royal memory, including cyclical embodiments (Zuidema 1990; McAnany 1995; Helms 1998; Gose 2008). One might suggest that the propensity for a motley range of divine beings and tutelaries to be embraced by rulers comprises a hallmark of Pre-Columbian social complexity. What seems consistently fundamental is the sacred position and justification of authority, occluding purely 'secular' modes. If the choice of divine model is locally contingent and the focus of agency (the subjectification of leaders into gods), a cosmological hierarchy often enduringly structures native Amerindian polities.

One rider to this point is that the sovereign, in the Americas or elsewhere, is almost invariably bound up with the realm's lands and resources, and the unpredictable vicissitudes of their bounty, both near and far (Helms 1993). It was Frazer who argued forcefully that the monarch serves as an intermediary and agent for the gods, and that the figure's mandate is to ensure the prosperity of the people. An association to the sun in agricultural regeneration is very often fundamental (cf. Hocart 1927, 41ff). Leaders may also be linked to telluric beings, and storm and lightning celestials for fertile soils, timely rains, and good harvests, not to mention privileged powers over sea, lacustrine, and herd wealth. This points to the real ontological difference of sacred sovereigns – the ability to impact the particular environment(s) and resources/production of groups in extraordinary ways.

Fourth, crucial to the institution of divine leaders is the materialization of difference, in material culture and spatial terms. They need to be set apart, to make them distinct and special, and objects of veneration in their own right. This happens in manifold ways, during their lifetimes and frequently long after their death. And as we have seen, their presencing is frequently mediated (e.g. through effigies, speech, costuming, performance). The archaeological record is especially attuned to certain strategies for divinizing sovereigns: mimesis, metaphor, and monuments.

It is worth remembering the reception of royal bodies and their domains of influence need not be continuous across a realm. In some prominent examples, rulers maintain the most influence and sovereignty in the central core (e.g. Tambiah 1977; Southall 1988). Outside this zone, the ruler might mainly hold ritual prerogatives and mutual benefits mediated by consent and allegiances dominated the interactions. Rulership in these cases brokers allegiances to the center for their ritual legitimacy and 'civilizing' benefits. One wonders if and how clinal relations in cosmic polities might accord with the much debated records of pilgrimage centers, urban forms and expansive horizon styles of the ancient Americas (e.g. Kolata 2003).

Finally, in the ancient Americas, legitimacy will be impacted by verbal, visual and material forms that work to convey the godly status and authority of rulers. Besides monuments (e.g. Schele and Miller 1986), this might concern titles and identity (i.e. *k'uhul ajaw* of the ancient Maya)[13] or visual tropes (e.g. size/rank; heroic compositions; portraiture) that seek to distinguish and celebrate special divinized individuals. While materialization is common to most projects of rulership, it should be remembered that materialization itself is often a source and target of critique.

It is worth noting that the verbal and visual records of 'divinity' in rulership need not coincide or be consistent even within the same regime, much less across regional traditions (Winter 2008, 76). For the

Inca, famously without much figurative art or formal writing for official narratives, Ramírez (2005) highlights the verbal kinds of legitimacy which linked their sovereigns to the divine, as recorded by the Spanish accounts. She identified four modes: honorifics and communication; inventing oral traditions; privileged access to divine signs/will; rhetoric about divine status and lineage during succession. In addition to the verbal forms were various tangible objects and places which legitimated ancestry and authority (e.g. effigies of ancestors, clothing, sumptuously rare materials, ritual practices), which marked the semiotic worlds of sacred sovereigns. By obligation, scholars will need to tack back and forth between verbal and object residues of legitimacy, using whatever available forms, to help identify and trace patterns through time.

In sum, archaeology maintains both an exceedingly privileged, yet also frequently blindered, vantage of sacred sovereigns in the ancient Americas. The archaeological record of the Americas is deep and rich; and a preoccupation with change through time, we feel, is indispensable for contributing to comparative theory about the crucial qualities and religious sanction of rulers and rulership around the world. This issue offers new contributions that update and reframe our knowledge about this most august of human institutions – as old, timeless and inconstant as the divinities themselves.

Notes

1. Taken explicitly here to mean 'before Columbus,' rather than to imply a unity of mind, historical basis (cf. ancient Maya), or a long-term one-size fits all cultural tradition.
2. We use 'divinity+leadership' as a heuristic device incorporating the two concepts; it aims principally to avoid uncertainties with gender and typological evolutionary-stage thinking implied by 'sacred' or 'divine kingships.'
3. And, given its tough archaeological implications, decoupled from 'sovereignty,' strictly speaking. But see Baquedano and Berdan (2025).
4. If paraphrasing or citing directly, we will preserve the original sense with gendered implications (e.g. 'kingship'); otherwise, we prefer more neutral terms, such as rulership and leadership.
5. Granted, these works focus on Old World societies, literate and grounded in historical evidence/perspectives.
6. Northwest Coast groups and the Natchez are perhaps good exceptions.
7. Sahlins reflects on being a 'Hocartesian' (in Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 23); while de Heusch (1997) resurrects Frazerian, and Levi-Straussian, dispositions.
8. But see also Graeber and Wengrow 2021 (esp. Chapters 5, 9, 10).
9. Used synonymously with 'tendencies' and 'religiosities.' 'Immanentist' and 'transcendentalist' are also adjectives used to describe faiths, cultures, societies and peoples.

10. See Moin and Strathern (2022b, 17) for subtypes of Righteous Kingship ('Doctrinal' and 'Zealous'), arising under the transcendentalism (see also Strathern 2019: Ch.3).
11. In terms of diachronic process, they do stress the idea of 'sinking status' (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 9ff.), describing the status of heirs and successors, increasingly removed geneaologically (and thus cosmologically) from the founding ruler. This may lead to: centrifugal dispersion of royals (by fissioning and internal struggle) into outer regions (to take power) and stranger-king formations and core–periphery relations.
12. When large scale hegemonic polities emerge and expand to engage neighbouring ethnic groups with their own religious systems and pantheons, 'solar' religiosity comes to the fore (Makowski 2010).
13. 'Holy lord' (Houston and Stuart 1996; but also see Martin 2020, 72–73, for its use associations with specific places, emblem glyphs).

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