

Article

Animating Idolatry: Making Ancestral Kin and Personhood in Ancient Peru

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Abstract: Historical and archaeological records help shed light on the production, ritual practices, and personhood of cult objects characterizing the central Peruvian highlands after ca. AD 200. Colonial accounts indicate that descendant groups made and venerated stone images of esteemed forebears as part of small-scale local funerary cults. Prayers and supplications help illuminate how different artifact forms were seen as honored family members (forebears, elders, parents, siblings). Archaeology, meanwhile, shows the close associations between carved monoliths, tomb repositories, and restricted cult spaces. The converging lines of evidence are consistent with the hypothesis that production of stone images was the purview of family/lineage groups. As the cynosures of cult activity and devotion, the physical forms of ancestor effigies enabled continued physical engagements, which vitalized both the idol and descendant group.

Keywords: ancestor veneration; animacy; materiality of stone; Andes; Quechua; extirpation of idolatry; funerary cult; Ancash; Cajatambo



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1. Introduction

In recent years, archaeological scholarship has been much more receptive to the notion that personhood and subjectivity can be extended to nonhuman beings.¹ It is also true, however, that the kind of person may frequently be vague or in doubt. The ancient Andes provides an extraordinary record for examining the presence and engagement of nonhuman persons in the ancient past, given the great commitment taken by indigenous peoples to vitalize the landscape and its features and objects (e.g., [Dean 2010](#); [Dransart 2006](#); [Jennings and Swenson 2018](#); [Kosiba et al. 2020](#); [Lau 2013, 2016](#); [Townsend 1992](#)).

This essay examines a long-lived tradition of cult objects and effigies in later pre-hispanic central Peru. I focus on their status as ancestral persons, hypothesized as the following. It is known that stone uprights and carved monoliths were produced and treated as important embodiments of esteemed forebears ([Duviviers 1977, 1979](#); [Lau 2006, 2008](#)). If, as is commonly held, ancestralization comprises the set of practices and beliefs that transitioned (“make”) an honored deceased into a transcendent being, the process should be based on kinship relations. As ancestor images, their production and veneration should have, notionally, been the purview of family or lineage groups who considered themselves progeny. To more fully scrutinize this framework, we need to consider the evidence to associate ancestor effigies and ritual places with the practices of kin groups.

This study discusses documentary and archaeological evidence to help approximate several relations of personhood: naming practices, forms of address, and the physical production and context of effigies. The evidence available to us indicates that ancient Andean ancestors were seen as and treated as extraordinary and esteemed kinspersons.

2. Framing Andean Ancestral Persons: Anthropological Perspectives and Historical Accounts

Two key themes broadly underpin my argumentation. The first concerns the animacy of nonhuman beings. By now, a well-established ethnographic literature reveals

how indigenous traditions of the Americas commonly attribute an interior animacy and personhood to beings, many of whom take the forms of plants and trees (e.g., [Allen 1988](#); [López Austin 1988](#)), animals (e.g., [Hallowell 1960](#); [Kohn 2013](#); [Walens 1981](#)), spirits and numina (e.g., [Descola 1986](#); [Fausto 2012](#); [Viveiros de Castro 1992](#)), and/or objects or landscape features (e.g., [Salomon 2018](#); [Santos-Granero 2009](#)). This “motley crowd of others” ([Viveiros de Castro 2001](#), p. 23) may be crucial because they help constitute identity by way of their otherness: They are fundamentally linked as key beings in various cultural practices crucial for ongoing group livelihood, such as hunting, farming, herding, warfare, or collective ritual. Put another way, nonhumans are important in how humans understand and maintain their humanity because they are essential in social relations (broadly defined) and systems of framing selfhood and social organization. This essay follows an earlier thread that the dead hold status as a kind of special nonhuman being and other ([Lau 2013](#), chp. 5), invested with a capacity to affect the livelihood of their descendants.

The capacity for the dead to intervene in the lives of the living, of course, is the basis of the other key theme: death practices. Bloch and Parry theorized (1982) that mortuary rituals, broadly, help legitimate political arrangements (such as rights to rule and elder power structures) and facilitate the smooth inheritance of roles and resources of the deceased. They are also pegged to local understandings about the fate of souls and the afterlife; mortuary practices and the symbolism of many Amerindian traditions seek to manage finite lifeforces or vitality (see also [Santos-Granero 2019](#)).

Death practices in the prehistoric Andes were variable across time and space ([Dillehay 1995](#); [Eckhout and Owens 2015](#); [Shimada and Fitzsimmons 2015](#)), but one enduring mode consisted of ancestor cults. These formed the predominant mortuary practice in the Andes reported by the early colonial accounts, and considerable evidence points to a much deeper history ([DeLeonardis and Lau 2004](#); [Isbell 1997](#); [Kaulicke 2001](#); [Salomon 1995](#)). Unlike other parts of the Americas, where the deceased may be destroyed, left to disintegrate, or forgotten, in Andean ancestor cults, the bodies and images of special named forebears were often curated for periodic renewal ceremonies and particularly as wrapped mummified bundles. Descendant groups regularly made and venerated other kinds of ancestor images, such as figurines, statues, or sculpted stones, of varying sizes, materials, and scales of demographic and regional potency ([Lau 2015a](#)). Creese’s (2017) discussion about art as “kinning” is instructive here, not only because of the semiotic affordances made possible through the replication of physical forms, but also, in the Andean case to be detailed, making ancestor images essentially propagates the symbolic system (kinship) by articulating material expressions (effigies of prototypes) and social relations of the cult group; similar to kinship itself, it distributes ancestral relations and prescribes their articulation.

This essay considers several periods of the Andean past and aims to draw comparisons to their respective evidential records. One important source of evidence comes from colonial era texts, especially of the 16th and 17th centuries. The other source of evidence comes from the archaeological record, and my objective with this contribution is to help furnish the logic for a comparison between the material/visual record and the written texts. To be sure, the relations between colonial accounts and the archaeological record are fraught (e.g., [MacCormack 1991](#); [Pillsbury 2008](#); [Quilter 1996](#); [Salomon 1999](#); [Sillar and Ramón 2016](#)), but I believe critical reading and select comparisons help illuminate the ancient record, particularly in regions with profound regional historical continuities. This commits to the view that, despite the sharp disjunctions in time and socio-religious context, the written texts have major relevance for assessing traditions of artifact forms and social practices, both colonial and prehispanic (e.g., [Dean 2010](#); [Duviols 1977, 1979](#); [Isbell 1997](#); [Murra 1980](#); [Rowe 1946](#)).

Two broad kinds of documentation are especially relevant. Colonial era eyewitness testimonies and accounts (the “chronicles”) often treated the places and histories of the Inca, especially of southern Peru and the Cuzco heartland (e.g., [Cobo \[1653\] 1990](#); [Guaman Poma de Ayala \[1615\] 1980](#)). The “Idolatries”, meanwhile, emerged out of the colonial furor to

Christianize Andeans and campaigns to extirpate pagan practices, from ca. the late 16th to the mid-18th century, especially in the highland communities of central Peru. Descriptive accounts and court testimonies resulted from what MacCormack (1991, p. 390) called evangelization's "controlled ferocity" during the oppression of village-based and regional cults of the highland communities (e.g., Arriaga 1999; Duviols 2003; Mills 1997; Polia 2017; Salomon and Urioste 1991). Both kinds of records provide significant information about how stone images were characterized, used, and engaged with as objects of cult and animate features of communities and landscapes.

In particular, the colonial writings shed light on the widespread highland pattern of veneration of superhuman ancestral beings who took tangible physical forms (e.g., Dean 2010; Duviols 1979; Lau 2008, 2016). Usually these images were lithic forms: rounded pebbles, jagged rocks, boulders, uprights (Figure 1), and outcrops.² They could be portable or stationary, small and large. Mountains (Castro de Trelles 1992; Salomon and Urioste 1991) were the ultimate embodiments on the landscape (Gose 2006, 2016). Spanish priests called many such forms *huacas* (also *guacas*), a term they used synonymously with "idols".³ This pairing emerged out of the Christian gaze targeting their status both as tangible things and as false gods. The lithic material often had distinctive qualities, such as translucence, luster, mottling or striping, and smoothness. Unusual features could also be important: holes, protuberances, or natural features that approximated anthropomorphic or zoomorphic parts (e.g., eyes, mouths, limbs). The stones may have also been modified through shaping and carving (e.g., Lau 2016).



Figure 1. Standing stone uprights (*huancas*) at the foot of the Cordillera Blanca, above the city of Huaraz. Passersby have left stones to create an *apacheta* pile. Photograph by author.

Descendants venerated ancestors because they owed their existence to them (Cobo [1653] 1990)⁴ and for their continued vitalizing power (Salomon 1991; Taylor 2000). The effigies embodied progenitors of various kin collectives (*ayllu*). They owned the fields and herds and looked after their livelihoods. They also helped mediate the important rains that renewed the annual round. Ancestors were venerated as tutelaries who safeguarded the group and its lands and resources. In short, Andeans trusted in their ongoing impact for the group's wellbeing and prosperity (Arguedas and Duviols 1966; Arriaga 1999; Castro de Trelles 1992, pp. 26–27; Doyle 1988; Duviols 1977).

Each *ayllu* group had its own ancestors, ranked according to its own genealogical traditions (Isbell 1997; Zuidema 1990; Salomon 1999). These articulated group origins and tracked primordial actions of those forebears who settled the landscape and begat subsequent peoples. At the highest position was the founding progenitor, whose corpse in bundled form was called a *mallqui* or *illapa*. Standing stone uprights (*huancas*)⁵ were

also sometimes apical progenitors (Figure 1), those who manifested the capacity, or were deemed ancient enough to lithify (Zuidema 1973, p. 19). Other ancestral embodiments included pebbles, rocks, crags, and mountains, but also items such as carved monoliths and pottery jars; even tombs could be taken as instantiations. These were infused with the potency of the ancestor and activated and charged through ritual. Hence, there were many kinds of ancestral forms who fit into greater and lesser levels of ritual organization and who could be incorporated into the landscape (Lau 2015a). The local cult, with its articles and lands/herds, had its own caretakers and adherents; Christian priests demonized them as the “ministers” and “dogmatizers”, those kinspeople who continued to actively conduct and advocate pagan practices.

The principal *huaca* idols tended to be the mummy bundles and large stones and monoliths (Figure 2). There were also numerous smaller and more portable cult objects, which the Spanish saw as “lesser idols” (Figure 3).⁶ They had many local names but were referred to as *chancas*, *conchuri* (*Con Churi*, *cunchur*), and occasionally, *huacicamayoqs* (“heads of houses”)⁷ (Ávila, in Arguedas and Duvíols 1966, pp. 255–56; Ariaga 1999, p. 35; Mills 1997, pp. 76–77, 84).⁸ These were deemed family gods⁹ and generally the charge of the living head member. They were passed down typically along hereditary or affinity lines.¹⁰ As kinds of persons, they were considered vital, suprahuman members of the family, to whom offerings were made, and who were addressed in the same breath as parental and elder figures (Salomon and Urioste 1991, n366 and p. 86).



Figure 2. Stone monolith carved in the form of a seated, cross-legged mummy. Note the flat mask-like face, ear spool, and flexed and tucked position. Such effigies may have replaced disintegrated bundles or sought to show the lithification and enduring materiality of ancestors. Museo Arqueológico de Ancash, Huaraz. Photograph by author.



Figure 3. Small-sized ancestor figure excavated at Chinchawas. Note the flat mask-like face and seated position; height 6.4 cm, width 3.6 cm. Photograph by author.

Reports of an extirpation visit sometimes concluded with a tally of its deeds and items that were collected for public destruction and confiscation (Table 1). Arriaga's how-to extirpation manual (e.g., Arriaga 1999, p. 138) made this accounting official operating procedure for increasingly standardized monitoring. Those portable and flammable items were burned in public. Shrines were razed, and stone monuments were destroyed or buried on the spot. The reports provide a general sense of the relative numbers of cult objects involved. For example, over an eighteen-month period in 1617–1618, Arriaga (1999, p. 23) observed the removal and destruction of over 603 principal *huacas*, 189 *huancas*, 617 *mallquis*, and 3418 *conopas* from the Cajatambo region alone.¹¹ This is roughly in the same order observed by the Augustinians during early evangelizing efforts in Huamachuco, which reported, in 1560, the destruction of over 3000 idols (Castro de Trelles 1992, p. 39).

Table 1. Numbers of idols tabulated in church visits to highland regions and parishes therein.

Priest-Writer	Year of Visit	Region/Number of Towns-Confessors	Huacas Principales/Públicas	Mallquis	Huancas	Lesser Idols
Juan de San Pedro (Castro de Trelles 1992)	c.1560	Huamachuco	-	-	300+ Guachecoa(es)	-
Arriaga and Avendaño (Arriaga 1999)	1617–1618	Cajatambo and Chançay	603	617	-	3418
Francisco de Ávila (Arguedas and Duvíols 1966, p. 255)	1611	Huarochirí	Mentions that over 5000 idols were observed in five parishes comprised of over 7000 confessors			
Hernández Príncipe (1923)	1622	Recuay (Huaylas) (ca. 10 communities)	46	"100 y más"	-	"no hay número" (includes <i>huancas</i>)
Diego Álvarez de Paz (in Duvíols 2003; Polia 1999)	1618	Ocros and Lampas provinces (2427 confessors)	345	230	-	1225
None identified (Polia 1999, p. 434)	1619	Conchucos (5 doctrines, 5 villages and 3104 persons)	297	-	-	-

Table 1 shows details from other extirpation visits, especially of parishes in the central Peruvian regions of Cajatambo and Ancash. The numbers relate to the prevailing protocols of painstaking investigations and remedial actions of confession and iconoclasm. There are inconsistencies in reporting, especially the conflation of categories (e.g., *huacas/mallquis*), missing categories (e.g., *huancas*), and vagaries of change through time and space. Notwithstanding, what even a conservative reading of the counts connotes is that extirpation had reported the elimination of many thousands of principal *huacas* and probably tens of thousands of lesser idols by the early 17th century. It can be estimated, again quite crudely, to be around four or five principal idols per village or basic *ayllu* collective or by another measure one “principal *huaca*” for every 7–10 individuals during the early 17th century (highland Cajatambo/Ancash area). These approximate figures basically agree with the descriptions noting the close connection between the *huacas* and the small extended families, the *ayllu* collectives responsible for them (see esp. Hernández Príncipe 1923).

The accounts of the ethnic Inca by key chroniclers (e.g., Cobo, Guaman Poma, Sarmiento) are also illuminating. Similar to other regions of Peru, deceased Inca rulers were also preserved into mummy bundles. However, they were also described as having made additional images, which were called *huauque* or *wawki* (Quechua for brother); these were simulacra made out of different materials and of varying degrees of likeness (Van de Guchte 1996; Hamilton 2018; Meddens 2020). They were carefully kept and attended to as physical extensions of the rulers, even after their death, as part of the *panaca*, the ruler’s descent group estate. Offerings and sacrifices were made to them. They were brought out in public display during celebrations and were deployed in battles to stir the morale of the Inca armies, having “the same powers as the bodies of their owners when they were still alive” (Cobo [1653] 1990, pp. 37–38).

In sum, the historical accounts observed different material forms of esteemed ancestors in local funerary cults. Having ancestors in a tangible form was essential because the cults required regular interactions with them. By the same token, their upkeep and stewardship by kinspeople signaled the vitality of the cult and its descendant collective.

3. Honorifics and Naming Practice

Early historical descriptions about native Andean idols were an exercise in translation. The intensive monitoring and classification of idols helped colonial authorities to both identify them and expedite their eradication. Passages that relate how indigenous Andeans addressed their cult images are revealing, because the naming approximates an indigenous sense of the object’s subjectivity and personhood.

In particular, native prayers and supplications in the Idolatries documents, some in the original Quechua (Table 2), essentially address the ancestor effigies in honorifics as special cherished kin, especially elders, parents, and brothers (Duviols 2003; Itier 2003; Polia 1999; Salomon and Urioste 1991). In other words, the devotion accorded kin-based subjectivity to the range of effigies: small-sized *chancas* or *conopas*, monoliths (*huancas*, *huacas*), and mummy bundles. Recognizing cult objects as valued and long-lived kinspersons was precisely the emic basis to their personhood (and paradoxically, the logic for Christians to cast it as false worship). Ultimately, what connected ancestors to their adherents turned on special contingent deictic relations having to do with kinship, filial reverence, and deference.

Table 2 reveals some additional points. The passages often used the term *yaya* (father, lord) to address the various ancestral embodiments.¹² This indicates the subordinate position of the worshipping descendants, who see themselves as their progeny. One priest in the extirpation campaigns of the Ancash highland observed, “they also venerate movable stones of particular workmanship with which they tell various myths . . . and they say they are the children of the stones” (Diego Álvarez de Paz, in Polia 1999, p. 418, my translation).

Table 2. Examples of addresses to ancestral instantiations (the original Quechua in italics).

Example 1. Prayer to shrine (of two stone effigies) to bring forth maize beer (Itier 2003 , p. 785).	
A <i>qapaq yaya</i> , a <i>apu yaya</i> , ka, <i>kayta mikuy</i> , <i>kayta upyay</i> , <i>aswa mirananpaq</i>	Oh, powerful father oh lord father Take eat this drink this so that there's abundance of chicha
Example 2. Prayer (to conopa (small charmstone)) for camay, vitalizing force (Itier 2003 , p. 790).	
<i>Yaya qunupa</i> , <i>runakta kamay</i> , <i>waynakta kamay</i> , <i>alli kanapaq kamay</i> , <i>mikuya qumay</i> , <i>aykatas qumaytaq</i>	Father conopa, give vitality to the people, give vitality to the young ones, Give them vitality so that they are well, give us food, and give us all that is necessary.
Example 3. Prayer/offering to Huari mummy bundles (Itier 2003 , p. 805–6).	
<i>Yaya warkuna</i> , <i>mikuy kamaq</i> , <i>puca kamaq</i> , <i>tiqsi kamaq</i> , <i>parquyuq</i> , <i>cakrayuq</i> , <i>kayta mikuy</i> , <i>kayta upyay</i> , <i>curiykikuna arpasunki</i> , <i>allin cakra kaçun</i> , <i>allin mikuy kaçun</i> .	Huari fathers, who vitalize the food, who vitalize the nourishment, who vitalize the soil, Owners of the canals, Owners of the fields, eat this, take this, Your children make you an offering, to have good fields, to have good harvests.
Example 4. On the intercessional role of Con Churi (Salomon and Urioste 1991 , p. 86).	
<i>cay chica llactam cay chaupi ñamca llacsas huatu</i> <i>mira huato lluncu huachac hurpay huachac ñis cap</i> <i>cascanta yachanchic chaymantas cay</i> <i>ñiscanchiccuna ñau pachaca chayman ric</i> <i>runacunacta con churiquip yayaiquip ma chuyquip</i> <i>simincamachu hamunqui ñispas ñic carcan chaysi</i> <i>manam ñictaca ri cuti con choriquictarac</i> <i>huyarichimuy ñiptin cotimuc carcan</i>	This is all we know about Chaupi Ñamca, Llacsas Huato, Mira Huato, Lluncho Huachac, and Urpay Huachac. In the old days, they say, these huacas would ask those who went to them, “Have you come on the advice of your own Con Churi, your father, or your elders?”

The Huarochirí document discusses a related kind of cult image: sacred masks (*huayos*) from the face and other body parts of heroes and captive enemies ([Salomon and Urioste 1991](#), pp. 120–21). These masks were ritual objects and also foci of veneration. They were danced to, offerings were made to them, and they were also carried on litters as agentive objects, similar to other objects in *huaca* and ancestor veneration. Notably, the captive enemy, before he was to be dispatched and his flayed face made into a mask, would beseech the captor, “Brother [‘wawki’], soon you’ll kill me. I was a really powerful man, and now you’re about to make a *huayo* out of me. So before I go out onto the plaza, you should feed me well and serve me drinks first.”

This passage describes the transformed relationship between the captor and the captive: from one of enmity to one of kinship. Similar to the *huauques* and ancestor images more generally, the making of *huayos* appears to have been a form of making kin and kinning ([Creese 2017](#)). The process incorporates the image-person into the social collective and norms of social practice based on reciprocity.

4. Ritual Spaces for Ancestor Cult

I now turn to the ancient record and specifically to contexts of ancestor effigies and their architectural spaces. Other works have detailed a rich record of mortuary practices in highland Peru, specifically in the Ancash highlands (Figure 4) ([Ibarra 2009; Lau 2000, 2015b, 2016; Ponte 2015](#)). This study underscores the strong pattern of association between stone effigies and their relatively modestly sized ritual spaces.

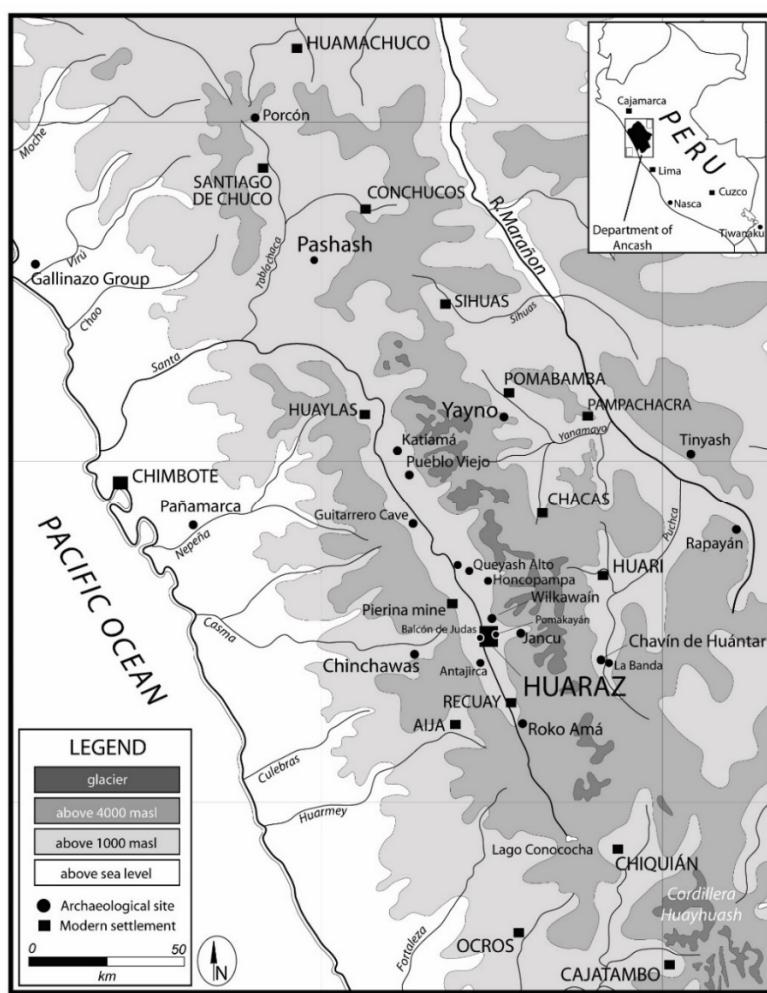


Figure 4. Map of north central Peru and places indicated in the text. Map by author.

By the first centuries AD, ancient Ancashinos began to entrust the human remains of esteemed forebears to burial spaces. Most were essentially modest covered spaces or small-sized buildings to store and curate physical human remains; these follow many of the general behavioral patterns detailed in the Idolatries (Isbell 1997; Salomon 1995). Early Recuay tradition tombs (AD 200–400) were mainly subterranean, utilizing cists, hollows, small chambers, and galleries. Later in the Recuay tradition and by the onset of the Middle Horizon (AD 700), aboveground tombs (or *chullpas*) (Figure 5), with a rectangular plan and often with multiple chambers, became predominant; *chullpas* continued to be the predominant burial architecture until the conquest.

As in the Idolatries testimonies, the dead were not buried directly in the soil but, rather, were left open inside the covered space—flexed, desiccated, and wrapped in textiles. Recovering intact bundles has been rare, but field reports indicate human remains and preservation consistent with flexed corpses that deteriorated in the open (Bria 2017; Gamboa 2009; Grieder 1978; Ponte 2015). Many cult effigies made in stone and ceramics are depicted as seated, flexed and bundled individuals (Lau 2000, 2006) (Figures 2 and 3).

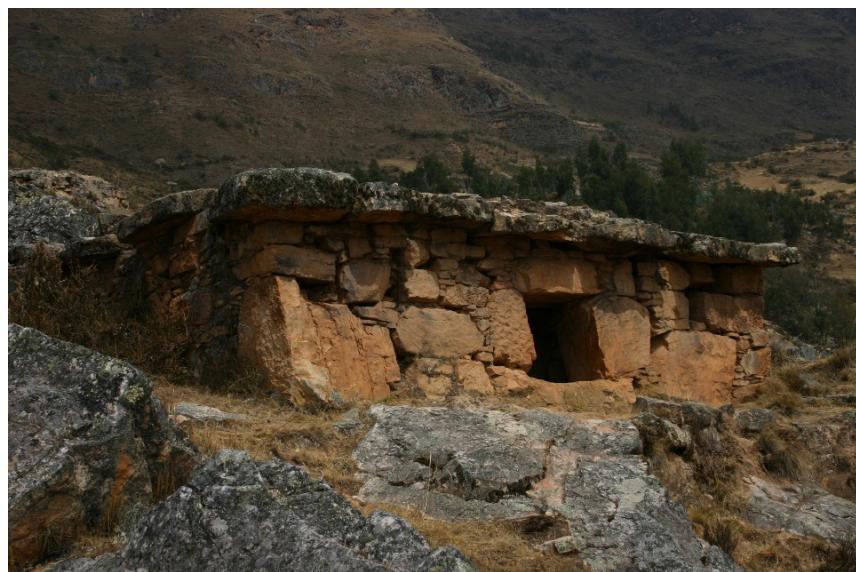


Figure 5. Typical aboveground mausoleum (*chullpa*), near Pampa Chacra, Peru; approximately 3 m wide. Large, flat roofing slabs protected a low, single-chambered interior. Small highly visible doorways allowed periodic access for small descendant collectives. Photograph by author.

The mausolea were repositories to keep and retrieve the human remains and cult articles (Figure 6) for various post-mortem treatments and handling (Isbell 1997). Earlier constructions were usually single chambered, but later, the mausolea grew larger and more complex. Some tombs were large enough to accommodate the bundled interments of extended families or small kin groups over many generations, very similar to the pattern detailed in the Idolatries. Further, these buildings were not permanently sealed or buried. Small, highly visible doorways (Figure 5) allowed relatively easy access to the chambers' contents, including the burials and offerings.



Figure 6. Interior of a *chullpa* structure, near Roko Amá, showing built-in compartments for the storage of special cult objects and paraphernalia. Today, they contain offerings made to the building's spirits, in the form of coca leaves, sweets, and sacrifices of guinea pigs. Photograph by author.

Funerary locations varied greatly. They could be found near residential areas, as well as in more remote locations, often in elevated and highly visible areas. They were often situated in areas that marked important places in oral traditions, such as places of emergence/dawning (*pacarina*) or milestone acts by their forebears (Lau 2000). Special land-forms (e.g., mountains, outcrops, springs, lakes) marked these origin places. Caves,

in particular, were emphasized for their role in *ayllu* beginnings and key associations to water, fertility, and the underworld. Tombs and stone monuments were built at, or oriented towards, these places. The mausolea, with their dark interlinked chambers and often awkward passageways, often simulated the qualities of cave interiors.

The Idolatries accounts also mentioned walled open areas, just outside or near the tombs, that were places where effigies and cult idols would be brought out and feted. These were called *cayan*, located on terraces or platforms (Figure 7). Such spaces have been found near funerary structures, often with evidence of offerings, intensive feasting, and stone sculpture. The spaces are irregular, with walls of variable height, and measure roughly 10–15 m on a side; this is consistent with use by relatively small ritual collectives, likely in the order of dozens of people, rather than hundreds or more (Bria 2017; Gero 1991; Ibarra 2009; Lau 2002; Paredes 2012). Sampling excavations have found offering caches directly outside of *chullpas*, often of miniature vessels.



Figure 7. Photograph of Chinchawas, showing the main settlement mound and locations of a ceremonial enclosure (perhaps a ‘*cayan*’) and a standing upright (*huanca*). Over 40 carved stone monoliths were identified across the site. Photograph by author.

Early colonial religiosity of the rural Andean highlands centered on entreating ancestors for group wellbeing and renewal (Doyle 1988; Duviols 1971; Salomon 1995). The various tombs and ancestor images (see below) were instrumental because they comprised the physical milieu to ensure engagement with the ancestors (Lau 2000, 2008). The repositories were revisited over the agricultural round (Doyle 1988) and added onto over generations because of a long-term devotion to the construction and its contents; this, of course, is precisely the behavioral pattern typical of ancestor cults in the Andes and elsewhere globally. The mortuary places marked the very grounds, both the physical repository and rationale, of ancestorhood. Based on the documentary record, Gose (2006, p. 35) proposed the term “cosmological plumbing system” to refer to how cult activities, especially offerings and libations, essentially sought to feed into and tap into potent ancestral flows crucial to both physical and cosmological domains (rains, water, alimentary, bloodline); burial shrines and *pacarinas* were particularly important as access points of the system for this ritual work.

For more ancient groups of the Ancash highlands, studies have referred to “descent-scapes” to characterize this phenomenon more broadly and also to help frame diachronic consideration of the material record of long-lived cult contexts (Lau 2015b, p. 184). By this I mean the ongoing or perpetual materialization of the esteemed dead and the past as the mode to renew and understand their lived world; this was a long-term, cumulative ritual

commitment of local and regional kin collectives dedicated to a sacred landscape that was animated and made intelligible by genealogical traditions, mytho-historical doings, and landmarks of its ancestors. Thus, we find that tomb constructions were often renovated, adding/connecting new extensions, chambers, and entire new buildings, when necessary (Gamboa 2009; Ponte 2015). Cemeteries grew with the addition of entire new repositories, while others were disused and fell into disrepair or saw post-interment offering caches (Grieder 1978; Lau and Luján Dávila 2020; Paredes 2012). These physical additions and alterations are remnant clues to an ongoing development of a kin group's mortuary and the local symbolism of a uniquely changing landscape.

5. Cult Effigies and the Archaeological Record

The use of stone monuments was another crucial component of long-lived, local ancestor cults. These were integrated in buildings, burial grounds, and other significant spaces. Funerary buildings also incorporated many other kinds of worked stones, including tenon heads (carved heads cantilevered into walls), rosettes, cornices, and roofslabs (Lau 2006, 2016). Such features formed part of a larger social program of ritual, building, and renovations at existing funerary places. Given the ravages of extirpation, looting, and theft, however, only a handful of stone monuments are known in their intended architectural settings or within the confines of their original ancient settlements.

To make their associations to their funerary place more explicit, standing stone uprights (*huancas*) were placed on, in, or near the tomb repositories (Figure 7). For example, such stones marked interment places at Jancu and Chinchawas (Lau 2002; Wegner 2007). This was probably a much more common practice in the ancient past, but uncarved uprights that have toppled over or been moved are very difficult to distinguish.

The best-known monoliths with carved ancestor imagery are of the Recuay tradition, ca. AD 1–700 (Brito 2018; Lau 2000, 2006, 2011; Moretti 2019; Schaedel 1952; Wegner 2007). The monoliths adorned thresholds to important buildings and also stood nearby as freestanding statues. Many figures are depicted upright in a seated, tucked position, similar to a mummy bundle. There are also views of frontal figures (Figure 8) standing/splayed and occasionally flanked by other beings. All are either set into (or found near) burial architecture and found nearby platform-shrines and ceremonial *cayan* enclosures.

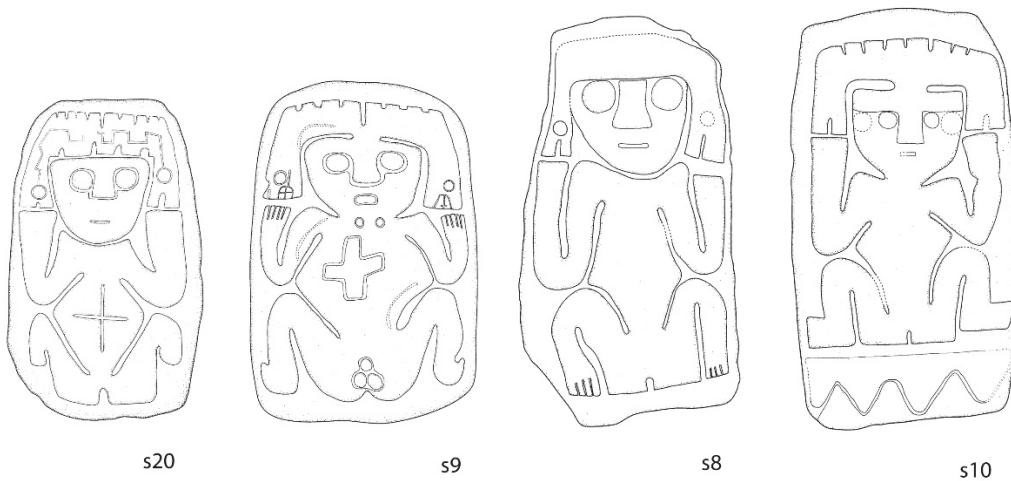


Figure 8. Drawing showing four (of nineteen) vertical slab sculptures documented at Chinchawas. The variability in frontal figure depiction and lack of standardization in size and quality indicate slow periodic production and accumulation of ancestor figures for the community's local 'descent-scape.' Sculpture s10 is 127 cm tall. Drawings by author.

Two sculptures remain on an ancient high-status house complex at Chinchawas; many others were documented scattered in the public and funerary sectors of the site (Lau 2006; Mejía Xesspe 1941). Tenon-head sculptures adorned *chullpa* mausolea at Katiamá (Zaki 1978) and Tinyash (Falcón and Diaz 1998; Thompson and Ravines 1973). Other stone

sculptures are known for having been found in excavation or reported as surficial finds from specific sites. These include Recuay tradition sculptures in large centers, such as Pashash (Grieder 1978; Lau and Luján Dávila 2020) and Yayno (Lau 2016), as well as in smaller communities around Huaraz (Bazán del Campo 2008; Wegner 2007). Other examples are known with varying degrees of certainty and detail of information about provenance (Brito 2018; Moretti 2019; Schaeder 1952; Soriano Infante 1950).

Julio C. Tello (1929) contended that the sculptures and spaces comprised components of an integrated religious program dedicated to local ancestor cults. Each group maintained its own funerary chamber(s), the shrine repository above, and a nearby walled ceremonial enclosure. These were all spaces where effigies of important male and female progenitors could be incorporated into the overall complex. It stands to reason that they served as commemorative monuments of persons who built, became interred in, or were otherwise associated with the nearby mausolea. Functionally, the monuments underscore the enduring, cynosural roles of ancestors in the ritual spaces, being the honored grandees and witnesses of the group's ritual activities.

The production of effigies should be important in this regard. One Spanish inquisitor noted that the making of stone and metal idols was accomplished by specialists; they were “sold” in exchange for promises of herds and good crops (Avendaño [1617] 2003, pp. 715–18). A later passage suggests that the painting and fashioning of cult objects were the purview of the specific ritual group. Avendaño’s observation thus hints that the making of ancestor images was a cyclical, reciprocal relationship between progeny and progenitor. Just as the descendants are the work of their makers, the ancestors (effigies) are the work of the descendants. Both engender and energize the other: Each is the result and beneficiary of the other’s vitalizing intervention (see Salomon 1991, p. 16). It seems reasonable to believe that descendants were charged with the right to create simulacra of their ancestors, i.e., bringing entities of the same group into being.

Notwithstanding, native commentary about the production of monoliths (carved or not) is generally scarce in the early Spanish descriptions, something that Hamilton (2018, p. 68) has also observed for the camelid *conopa* miniatures. He suggests that this intentional silence may “feign the illusion that conopas were not individually carved by human actors”, but rather were divinely instantiated objects, extraordinary and thus capable of their own transformation.¹³

The general silence on the making of *conopas* can be contrasted with the relatively detailed commentary on the making of *huauque* images (Table 1), the “brother” images of the Inca rulers (Acosta 1954; Cobo [1653] 1990; Sarmiento de Gamboa 2007).¹⁴ These were portable images that contained the king’s spirit or essence, his *camaquen*. They could serve as companions or stand-ins, with oracular functions. *Huauques* were also portraits and heirlooms and had their own staff and attendants. These images were created during their lifetime, so the rulers had some say over their form and material (Cobo [1653] 1990, p. 37). Their last form, upkeep, and veneration, however, were up to the descendants.

The *huauques* of the earliest dynasts were of stone¹⁵, and later effigies were of gold. The practice of making them was an innovation attributed to the reign of Manco Capac, according to Sarmiento de Gamboa (2007, p. 77). However, (Cobo [1653] 1990, p. 37) speculated on older beginnings: “This custom is so ancient [that] . . . it must date from the time of their earliest recollections. Although initially it was only the practice of the kings and great lords, as time passed the custom was extended so much that any important man might have a *guauque*.” Mention of “*gualqui*” (brother) images for provincial lords occurs also in the Idolatries of Cajatambo (e.g., Noboa [1656] in Duviols 2003, p. 299).

Table 3 shows that the brother images are characterized by a lack of patterning—in materials, form, and degree of likeness. Perhaps the only inflexible criterion is that all rulers should have at least one and that they were referred to as “brothers” and had their own names. As a kinsperson, they were the ruler’s alter-image, and because they were portable and circulated, they extended the ruler’s personhood and charismatic reach.

Table 3. *Huauques* (brother-images) of the Inca kings.

Sapa Inca Name	Huauque Name	Material	Form
Sinchi Roca	Guanachiri Amaro	stone	fish
Manco Capac	Indi		bird (~falcon)
	(another) Huanacauri	(stone)	mountain
Lloqui Yupanqui	Apo Mayta		
Capac Yupanqui	Apu-Mayta		
Inca Roca	(Vica-Quirao?)	stone	
Inca Viracocha	Inga Amaro		
Pachacuti Inca	Indi illapa	golden	(bulto)—made in his image
Yamque Yupanqui		golden	(bulto)—made in his image
Topa Inca Yupanqui	Cuxi churi		
Huayna Capac	Guaraqui inga	gold	(large)
Atahualpa	Ynga Guauqui, and Ticci Capac		bulto

After the ruler's death, his *huauque* was placed in or near the resting places of the dead king or his collective's estate. They were paired with the mummy effigy made of the desiccated body remains. *Huauques* might be seen to be similar to ancestral monoliths erected near tombs. [Van de Guchte \(1990, p. 293\)](#) makes a crucial point, however: Unlike *huancas*, which are persons transformed into stone at that location (manifesting their internal capacity for lithification), *huauques* are explicitly made (by others).

6. Making Kin out of Stone: Provisional Observations

How far back in time can we push back the patterning between kin groups and their cult images? Firm comparisons must await better datasets and more systematic testing. However, we can make some provisional observations about Recuay tradition stone sculpture (ca. AD 200–700) to help orient future work; these include the current record of formal variability, decentralized production, and local contexts of use.

An indicator of variability concerns the choice of raw materials. There is very little standardization in the kinds of stone used for Recuay stone sculpture; production generally emphasized locally available rock and local quarries. Recuay stone carving, especially from the region around Huaraz, frequently employed common local igneous rocks, especially andesites, rhyolites, granites, and trachytes ([Brito 2018; Lau 2006; Moretti 2019; Schaedel 1948; Soriano Infante 1950](#)). The preferred stones around the Huaraz area seem to have consisted of light gray to greenish gray andesites. Some pieces appear to use finer-grain porphyritic andesites from the Cordillera Negra. Rock debris and possible monolith pre-forms may be evidence of production on the eastern side of the Cordillera Negra, near Huaraz ([Brito 2018; Mejía Xesspe 1941](#)). The procurement of raw material overall seems very different from other major Andean stone working traditions (e.g., Inca, Tiwanaku, Chavín), which sometimes acquired stone from distant areas, which required greater transport and labor organization, and which resulted in more standardized forms and production.

Another indicator of variability was the coexistence of formal substyles. [Schaedel \(1948, 1952\)](#) observed a series of “central” and “peripheral” style areas in the Recuay sculptural tradition. These were based largely on distinctions in form (block shape, depth of carving, saliency of the figural plane) and imagery (type, naturalism, abstraction). The coexistence of various substyles resonates with the hypothesis of multiple ritual communities who rendered similar ancestor images differently.

The heterogeneity and lack of standardization in imagery, in particular, are consistent with the model of local decentralized production. Each sculpture is unique and contains

special elements executed in distinctive configurations and varying quality. In addition to position (splayed or seated, flexed), the human (ancestor) figures show distinguishing features, such as head and body ornaments, and special attire and accoutrements, such as weapons, bags, and musical instruments. These are probably related to the unique properties, special keepsakes, or achievements of specific individuals—the personhood of the depicted—as deemed important by the sculptor and descendant group.

The best published evidence for patterning of intrasite production derives from Chinchawas, a small village (ca. AD 500–900) where 43 carved monoliths have been documented, three in situ. The corpus shows notable differences in slab size, but with most adhering to shape tendencies and general proportions (for details, see [Lau 2006](#), pp. 229–31). The degree of craftsmanship also varies considerably, where the finer sculptures feature higher relief, greater detail, and more even surfaces. There are also instances of mistakes, errant gouges, unfinished parts, and re-use of older carved slabs; one carving was left unfinished and then re-carved on the other side. Some were defaced, and some were removed from their original spots. Overall, the corpus at Chinchawas shows great heterogeneity, with expedient and pragmatic solutions. Rather than a single artisan or workshop or a single program of installation, the sculptures likely resulted from sporadic efforts of part-time artisans affiliated with local social groups, and the local tradition developed over some four centuries.

The current evidence indicates that most ancestor stone carvings of the Recuay tradition were produced at different times, one by one, following the irregular needs occasioned by death and local initiatives of small kin groups to ancestralize known persons. This was a special kind of cultural production characterized by highly inconstant and contingent localized contexts of making, but nevertheless tethered to conservative dispositions toward ancestral forms and the ritual practices devoted to them.

7. Conclusions

To conclude, this essay considered ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence of ancestor cult practices in Peru’s central highlands. It discussed the textual record of devotional practices and honorific forms of address from early colonial accounts in order to inform how cult spaces and ancestral images were the purview of local kin groups. In spite of important disjunctions in time and social context, not to mention the critical problems of colonial writing, the written accounts shed light on ritual forms and patterning of the ancient past. The overall comparison is consistent with the hypothesis that, by the early centuries AD, funerary repositories were made and used by small collectives, probably kin groups, to keep and periodically handle their esteemed deceased. Ancestral personhood took many physical forms, most routinely as bundled and stone idols and features of the landscape. Broadly, the study adds to more general consideration of death practices and animism in the Americas by showing how these ancestor forms were addressed as and treated as cherished family members (forebears, elders, parents, siblings).

Animating idolatry might therefore best be seen as a process of making special kinds of kin and has unique implications for the ritual practices of the venerating group. Firstly, for each collective, the effigy extended human associations to the object forms and thus externalized person-specific deeds and qualities, as deemed worthy by the descendant group, into their ritual setting. As their *raison d’être*, the effigies appear to have been the cynosures of the cult’s devotion, and their physical presence enabled crucial physical engagements between the idols and descendants. In addition to doing superhuman work for the ritual collective (resulting in rains, abundance, and overall prosperity), they were engines for descendant identity and social reproduction. Finally, the procedures of making the effigies trusted in a logic based on reciprocal obligations and therefore was an ongoing, future-looking proposition. Just as a progenitor was responsible for or “made” the descendants, the descendants made, and continued making, the progenitor’s image.

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Notes

- ¹ This describes many forms and disciplinary spaces of archaeology (e.g., [Alberti 2016](#); [Pauketat 2013](#)). For the Andes, see ([Bray 2009](#); [Lau 2008](#); [Sillar 2009](#)) and for ethnographic and historical basis, see ([Allen 2015](#); [Duijols 1979](#); [Salomon 1998](#)).
- ² For the region in question, see [Lau \(2006, 2015a\)](#).
- ³ For example, very early in the *Relación de los Agustinos*, 1560, by Fr. Juan de San Pedro ([Castro de Trelles 1992](#), p. 22) or by the time of Francisco de Ávila’s *Tratado*, in 1608 (in [Arguedas and Duijols 1966](#), p. 200).
- ⁴ The close cultic relationship between ancestral images, especially mummies, and their worshipping descendants was widely acknowledged at least since the early detective work of Polo de Ondegardo on Inca mummies ([MacCormack 1991](#), pp. 390–91).
- ⁵ Similar *huanca*-like lithified tutelaries were called *Guachecopal* in the Huamachuco area (Juan de San Pedro, in [Castro de Trelles 1992](#), p. 27). There were other terms for them, such as *marca apárac* and *marcachárac* ([Arriaga 1999](#), p. 31). At other times, they were referred to as *marcayoc*, *llactayoc*, or *chacrayoc*, referring to their vigilance over villages and fields.
- ⁶ See also the different names of similar objects of Huamachuco province ([Castro de Trelles 1992](#), p. 56).
- ⁷ “*Camayoq*” signifies master or owner, and “*wasi*” means house.
- ⁸ *Conopas* and *illas* were another category of small talismanic objects, occasionally conflated with the other “lesser idols”. *Conopas* were typically in the form of animals and plants and were worshipped to give abundance to the form depicted, e.g., camelids, guinea pigs, maize. These could communicate with their bearers, were efficacious in household-level ritual activities, and were also valuable heirlooms, but did not feature heavily in the wider cults of founding ancestors ([Arriaga 1999](#), pp. 35–36). Many of these included “*mama*” in their names, connoting the maternal quality and also the parental/authority associations of the “lesser idols”.
- ⁹ They were frequently compared to ancient Roman family gods, the *lares* and *penates*.
- ¹⁰ Ávila notes the distinction that *cunchur* (of Huarochirí) act as intermediaries for the principal *huacas/gods* (Ávila, in [Arguedas and Duijols 1966](#), pp. 255–56), while the *chanca* helps in divining and communicating the will of the *cunchur*.
- ¹¹ Overseen by Hernando de Avendaño in the highland Chancay and Cajatambo areas.
- ¹² There are also certainly Christian connotations, in the use of “lord” and “father”. The term “*yaya*” (or father) is also used as an honorific for celestial bodies (e.g., sun, stars) and large landforms, such as mountains and boulders ([Itier 2003](#), p. 783; [Taylor 2000](#), p. 33).
- ¹³ [Hamilton \(2018, p. 82\)](#) also notes, following [Sillar \(2012\)](#), that *conopa* manufacturing may have been related to Inca standardized production and materialized ideology.
- ¹⁴ There is also mention of Manco Capac ordering a gold effigy made of his mother Mama Oclo; his afterbirth was placed in the stomach area of the figure.
- ¹⁵ This resonates with Zuidema’s observation that the oldest figures in long-lasting genealogies are so old and “so far removed” that they have been turned into stone ([Zuidema 1973](#), p. 19).

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