



Sex, Death, and Sacrifice in Moche Religion and Visual Culture

Steve Bourget

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The Moche people who inhabited the north coast of Peru between approximately 100 and 800 AD were perhaps the first ancient Andean society to attain state-level social complexity. Although they had no written language, the Moche created the most elaborate system of iconographic representation of any ancient Peruvian culture. Amazingly realistic figures of humans, animals, and beings with supernatural attributes adorn Moche pottery, metal and wooden objects, textiles, and murals. These actors, which may have represented both living individuals and mythological beings, appear in scenes depicting ritual warfare, human sacrifice, the partaking of human blood, funerary rites, and explicit sexual activities.

In this pathfinding book, Steve Bourget raises the analysis of Moche iconography to a new level through an in-depth study of visual representations of rituals involving sex, death, and sacrifice. He begins by drawing connections between the scenes and individuals depicted on Moche pottery and other objects and the archaeological remains of human sacrifice and burial rituals. He then builds a convincing case for Moche iconography recording both actual ritual activities and Moche religious beliefs regarding the worlds of the living, the dead, and the afterlife. Offering a pioneering interpretation of the Moche worldview, Bourget argues that the use of symbolic dualities linking life and death, humans and beings with supernatural attributes, and fertility and social reproduction allowed the Moche to create a complex system of reciprocity between the world of the living and the afterworld. He concludes with an innovative model of how Moche cosmological beliefs played out in the realms of rulership and political authority.

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