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Function and Meaning in Moche Human Sacrifice:
Advancing Theory and Practice in Archaeology

In archaeological research devoted to understanding human sacrifice in the ancient Moche society, two seemingly contradictory perspectives have emerged. The first examines the function of sacrificial ritual and iconography on Moche society. These studies are usually couched in terms of Marxist theories of religion and ritual, particularly focusing on the role of materialism and the consolidation of power in the Moche social elite. The second cluster of research attempts to understand the deep cultural meaning behind these sacrificial rituals, employing what Clifford Geertz called "thick description"[1] in order to place ritual sacrifice within a larger cultural context. Indeed, despite a highly developed system of iconographic representation, the lack of a Moche writing system presents a significant challenge for archaeological interpretation, providing a unique opportunity to evaluate the utility of function and meaning for understanding Moche human sacrifice.

This paper offers an in-depth comparison of the two theoretical perspectives, highlighting several papers and books that exemplify them. It identifies their strengths and weaknesses as demonstrated in several case-studies and calls attention to a new integrative methodology that is conducive to advancing our understanding of Moche human sacrifice. The paper will argue that while both functionalism and a meaning-

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[1] Phrase originally coined by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle.
Clifford Geertz. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

based approach have failings, either in applicability to or distortions of the real world,

archaeologists would do better to utilize both. Each offers unique perspectives and

methodologies for interpreting archaeological evidence and the role of human sacrifice in

the Moche social world; moreover, we should not assume that functionalism and

meaning-based approaches conflict, but rather that they complement each other. As

archaeologists, we would do better to hedge our bets by exploiting the advantages of each

theory while minimizing the disadvantages. This integration of perspectives produces

holistic and all-inclusive explanations that are better suited for understanding the inherent

complexity of Moche culture and society; for this reason, this paper makes the case for

analytical eclecticism.[2]

Throughout the paper, both function and meaning are evaluated for their utility in

launching archaeological projects on the Moche, particularly concerning the role of

human sacrifice within their society. It is shown that these two theoretical frameworks

offer differing perspectives of sacrifice that are better suited to different research

questions. For example, because functionalism approaches human sacrifice from a

materialist perspective, it automatically lends itself to an interpretation of ritual as a

social construction of explicit ideology; on the other hand, meaning-based approaches are

better suited toward understanding symbolic/belief systems as a pervasive social

phenomenon. Despite this disparity, it is argued that the opposing theoretical

perspectives inform each other's interpretations, greatly advancing our understanding of

Moche human sacrifice.

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[2] "Analytical eclecticism" is a phrase coined by Peter Kazentstein. "Japan, Asian-Pacific Security, and the Case for Analytical Eclecticism." *International Security*. 26.3 (Winter 2001/2002), pg. 153-185 Available online at <http://www.arts.cornell.edu/tmpphp/publications/p153.pdf>

Functionalism

Functionalists are primarily interested in the structure of human societies and the ways in which institutions like human sacrifice promote social stability. In this way, ritual sacrifice is understood to contribute to the overall functioning of Moche society, providing the cultural norms and rules that systemize relations between different members of society.[3] Although Garth Bawden spiritedly defends a meaning-based theoretical approach, he accurately characterizes much of the functionalist research in the introduction of his book *The Moche*: "This intellectual current regards the interaction between environment and social systems as the central force driving organizational strategy. Economic motivations are primary in this relationship…the determining factors in social integration and change are fundamentally similar across cultures."[4] For this reason, according to Bawden, functionalist archaeologists often employ a comparative methodology in an attempt to generalize to cross-cultural similarities.[5]

This trend is exemplified by Elizabeth DeMarrais's (et. al.) paper "Ideology, Materialization, and Power Strategies." In a comparative study of Bronze Age chiefdoms of Denmark, the Incan Empire, and the Moche, the authors argue that "ideology is materialized…in order to be part of the human culture that is broadly shared by members of a society. This process of materialization makes it possible to control, manipulate, and

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[3] Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 2007. Accessed 30 April 2007.
Available online at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Functionalism_(sociology)>
[4] Garth Bawden. The Moche. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996. pg. 5
[5] It is important to note that a cross-cultural methodology is not exclusive to a functionalism -- many meaning-based approaches do utilize a comparative analogical approach. However, where the former attempts to generalize to claims about human nature, the latter limits itself to elucidating an individual case study such as the Moche society.

extend ideology beyond the local group."[6] This comparative approach seeks to identify

broad patterns in human behavior that are universal to societies, necessarily

deemphasizing the unique cultural system present in the Moche civilization in order to

generate overarching similarities across many cultures. This is both a strength and a

weakness of the functionalist approach, determined both by a study's research question

and by the individual archaeologist's intent to make general claims about human nature.

According to DeMarrais, the materialization of ideology into a ritual event, a

symbolic object, a monument, or a writing system provides the elite classes with access

to the social power that is necessary to control society; it is a "strategic process in which

leaders allocate resources to strengthen and legitimate institutions to elite control."[7] In

such a way, DeMarrais places priority on the material aspects of human society like the

economy, technology, and physical environment, while ignoring the intangible social

meanings of iconography and ritual. Indeed, the authors explicitly express doubt in our

ability to access the symbolic systems of past societies: "we see tremendous limitations in

approaches that view ideology solely as ideas and beliefs that are rarely preserved in the

archaeological record…ideology is as much the material means to communicate and

manipulate ideas as it is the ideas themselves."[8] By focusing on the materialization of

ideology, DeMarrais assumes that an ideological system is already present and that

material culture can be used as a tool. She seeks to circumvent the difficulty of accessing

past beliefs by focusing on the overarching patterns of material distribution, patterns that

"inform archaeologists about unequal access to symbols of status or authority, the efforts

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[6] Elizabeth DeMarrais, et. al. "Ideology, Materialization, and Power Strategies." *Current Anthropology.*
37.1 (February 1996). pg. 15
[7] Ibid. pg. 16
[8] Ibid.

of one social segment to promote its ideology over others, and the effects of these strategic activities on the dynamics of social power."[9] As a positivist approach, functionalism is better suited to answering research questions that are limited in scope and grounded in the testing of hypotheses, which automatically gives an incomplete understanding of how human sacrifice is fixed in quotidian life; furthermore, it excludes much of the world archaeologists are trying to explain, particularly symbolic/belief systems.

For example, functionalism assumes that "status symbols" such as ritual sacrifice simply exist, conferring social power onto the elite classes, without explaining why such a ritual was present in the first place. In this way, DeMarrais interprets the discovery of elite burials containing artifacts used in the "Sacrifice Ceremony" as a material expression of the upper class' position in society. Indeed, she argues that the differential access to symbolic objects used in the Sacrifice Ceremony reinforced the Moche social hierarchy: "The iconographic system institutionalized the stratified character of the Moche society; its rich elaboration seemed to heighten the separation between the high elite and Moche peasants."[10] The disregard for the symbolic meaning of materialized ideology is apparent: sacrificial ritual and iconography is assumed to have societal value, with no attempt to understand how meaning confers social power. While DeMarrais cannot be faulted for not doing what she did not set out to accomplish, her study would have greatly benefited from a meaning-based perspective. The function of a ritual or symbol is best understood once their meanings have been fully grasped, without which the nuances of material culture is lost on the researcher.

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid. pg. 27

Compiling multiple lines of evidence, Richard Sutter and Rosa Cortez sift through competing hypotheses about the nature of Moche human sacrifice and attempt to determine whom the Moche were sacrificing and why. Sutter and Cortez contend that there are currently three competing models accepted by different archaeologists currently working on the Moche: the first and most widely accepted hypothesis posits that sacrificial victims were drawn from the local population to fight in ritual battles designed specifically to provide such victims. The second adopts the position of the centralized Moche state's expansion, in which sacrificial victims were taken by force from non-Moche polities to the south and east. The last model posits that victims for the Sacrifice Ceremony were drawn from the warriors of neighboring Moche polities who were captured in a political climate of localized warfare. Integrating evidence from the bio-geographic data of sacrificial victims excavated at Huaca de la Luna, and the corresponding iconographic, mortuary, and archaeological data, Sutter and Cortez conclude that "sacrificial victims were drawn not from the local Moche population but from a number of competing Moche polities."[11]

In a testament to the comparative bias of functionalist analysis, Sutter and Cortez make use of ethnohistorical analogy as evidence in support of the third model, arguing that the Inca often paraded captured enemy warriors from neighboring polities around the capital city of Cuzco. Only a single paragraph in the discussion section of Sutter and Cortez's paper puts forward a causative mechanism for Moche local warfare, stating that "the local-warfare model does not exclude the possibility that these sacrificial victims

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[11] Richard C. Suttern and Rosa J. Cortez. "The Nature of Moche Human Sacrifice: A Bio-Archaeological Perspective." *Current Anthropology*. 46.4 (August-October 2005). pg 521

were killed in response to environmentally induced social stress within the polity."[12] In so doing, Sutter and Cortez refuse to offer an overarching explanation for either Moche warfare or the presence of human sacrifice, merely presenting a universalist environmental account that has not been ruled out by the archaeological, iconographic, or biological data. While Sutter and Cortez make a convincing case for *what* happened at Huaca de la Luna, they have not adequately explained *why* ritual sacrifice occurred in the first place. These are two very distinct questions. It is the difference between establishing an objective history of Moche sacrifice and advancing theory in Moche archaeology. As scientists, the latter must be our ultimate goal -- to figure out what made Moche culture and society tick. Only with the creation of new interpretations can the frontiers of our understanding of Moche human sacrifice be advanced.

Furthermore, although the abstract of the paper claims that these results have "implications for the sociopolitical developments of and relations among the Moche,"[13] Sutter and Cortez do not consider the ramifications of their findings on the cultural identity of the Moche civilization, which is inextricably bound to the question of meaning. What are the implications of Sutter and Cortez's rejection of the centralized authority/state expansion model? How does our understanding of the Moche change based on the strong evidence for the localized warfare hypothesis? Meaning and function is hardly a one-way street -- examining the function of sacrificial ritual can greatly inform our understanding of symbolic systems and the deep cultural meaning that pervades Moche iconography. For example, the disrespectful treatment of sacrificial victims

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[12] Ibid. pg. 532
[13] Ibid. pg. 521

evident in both the archaeology and iconography is perhaps indicative not only of social organization but also of the localized interests and identities of different Moche polities.

Every theory seeks to break down the world into easily digestible bits, but by focusing exclusively on the Moche from a functional and materialist perspective, the above authors exclude much of the fundamental elements of religion, particularly the meaning of ideology. By throwing up our hands and saying that symbolic systems are inaccessible, we lose input from the most defining aspect of Moche social life. Furthermore, by employing a comparative and analogical methodology in order to make general claims about human nature, we can no longer grasp the essential character and identity of Moche society.

While functionalism may offer an incomplete picture of Moche society, there are a number of advantages to the functionalist formulation that should be noted. First, the theory is capable of generating myriad hypotheses that are often consistent with the archaeological data. Second, functionalism is easily operationalized for testable variables in the field. Lastly, the theoretical framework is both parsimonious and elegantly constructed -- the hallmark of any good theory -- and is especially good at explaining the aggregate effects of how "religious beliefs and rituals are useful in governing and regulating various aspects of the social system."[14] These theoretical and practical strengths must be exploited in any new methodology designed to advance our understanding of Moche human sacrifice.

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[14] Colin Renfrew. "The Archaeology of Religion." The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology. Edited by C. Renfrew and E.B.W. Zubrow. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. pg. 47-54

Meaning

In his book *The Interpretations of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that "Without the assistance of cultural patterns [man] would be functionally incomplete…a kind of formless monster with neither sense of direction nor power of self-control…Man depends upon symbols and symbol systems."[15] In this way, Geertz makes a compelling argument for delving deeper than a functionalist interpretation -- culture ought not to be separated from overarching symbolic systems. He therefore calls upon philosopher Gilbert Ryle's conception of thick description in order to understand the entire cultural context that defines any society.[16] However, it is important to remember that Geertz designed this approach for ethnography, not archaeology. Whether thick description presents a viable alternative methodology for archaeology remains to be seen.

Indeed, because of the mass looting of Moche sites that has taken place in Peru for at least one hundred years, placing artifacts in context is often an impossible task without vital provenience information. With this in mind, many scholars examining the meaning of Moche human sacrifice have employed an art historical methodology of Moche iconology, making reference to archaeological evidence where it is deemed relevant. According to Jules David Prown,[17] the objective of art history is to examine the elements of style inherent in material culture in order to better understand the underlying beliefs of Moche society, necessarily demanding a more qualitative approach. In this

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[15] Geertz, 1973. pg. 99
[16] Ibid. pg. 3-30
[17] Jules David Prown. "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?" History From Things: Essays in Material Culture. Edited by S. Lubar and W.D. Kingery. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993. pg. 1-19

way, art historians are better suited to parse the layers of cultural semantics, particularly as expressed in visual and physical form.

In *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice*, Steve Bourget attempts to bypass the unfortunate lack of contextual evidence by assuming that most artifacts we have today originated from Peruvian burial sites,[18] a claim that is fairly well-supported in the archaeology. Comparing the representation of rituals pertaining to sex, death, and sacrifice on Moche pottery and other artifacts, and the archaeological evidence of human sacrifice, Bourget attempts to delineate a tripartite organization for the Moche belief system. He notices three broad representations of subjects in the material culture, the first one consisting of human beings, the second of living-dead, skeletal, or mutilated individuals, and the third of beings with supernatural attributes. Consequently, Bourget argues that these actors correspond to three distinct domains, which are respectively the World of the Living, the World of the Dead, and the afterworld. Furthermore, the eventual sacrificial victims are firmly associated with the World of the Living, while the sacrificed victims engage in the same activities as supernatural beings in the afterworld. With this in mind, Bourget demonstrates how the belief in symbolic duality that connects life and death, humans and supernatural beings, and fertility and social reproduction allowed the Moche to create a system of reciprocity that linked the World of the Living and the afterworld.[19] Ritual human sacrifice, argues Bouget, as an act of reciprocity between humanity and the divine, is the primary example of this overarching system of belief.

Bourget should be commended for devising an elegant symbolic system that binds the myriad threads of Moche iconography. What remains to be seen is whether Bourget's

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[18] Steve Bourget. Sex, Death, and Sacrifice in Moche Religion and Visual Culture. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. pg. 48
[19] Ibid. pg. 225-227

theory is capable of generating new explanatory hypotheses that are testable in the field. In the last few pages of *Sex, Death, and Sacrifice*, Bourget leaves us with a possible application of his theory to the realm of political authority. He argues that the transition of successive rulers was made possible by the performance of "rigidly prescribed" public rituals that conformed to iconographic stereotypes. In such a way, the previous ruler did not really die, but rather journeyed to the afterworld where he was reinstated. "Thus occurred a case of perfect simultaneity, a duality of life and death with the dual reinstatement of two similar rulers -- one in the world of the living and the second one in the afterworld."[20]

While this argument demonstrates a possible explanation for social stability during times of political transition, Bourget's formulation is completely unfalsifiable in the material record, violating the cardinal rule of doing science. This meaning-based approach is decidedly unscientific and rules out the ability to make use of a positivist, problem-oriented approach. This may not be a bad thing in and of itself. However, the inability to propose new research questions, to generate explanatory hypotheses, or to operationalize observable variables marks a major deficit in our ability to carry out viable archaeological projects in the field. Furthermore, there is little reason to accept Bourget's conclusions since they are not backed up with evidence, only interpretation. Of course, it should be noted that hypothesis-testing is exactly what Geertz is reacting against when he proposes a hermeneutics of culture in *The Interpretations of Cultures*. This debate

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[20] Ibid. pg. 236

between more or less scientifically-minded scholars has characterized much of archaeological research for the last thirty years.[21]

Archaeology is at its core an interpretive science -- the ability to make absolute claims to knowledge is doubtful. And a meaning-based approach is even more subject to the individual interpretations of scholars. So perhaps we should not be surprised when in the space of one year, another major work is published that attempts to unravel the Moche symbolic system and arrives at an altogether different interpretation. In *Human Sacrifices for Cosmic Order and Regeneration*,[22] Edward de Bock employs a different methodology based on a Levi-Strauss type structural analysis of recurring consistencies within Moche iconography. He argues that iconography should be read as an independent ethnographic document. In such a way, de Bock is able to classify ritual scenes into a hierarchy of social classes based on "dress, size, position, posture, direction of movement and clarity in organization."[23] Partitioning the iconography into different ritual themes, de Bock calls attention to scenes of copulation between males and females in the "underworld" in order to demonstrate that the principle of female regeneration is the focus of Moche iconography. Females are given particular attention in moments of transition. Human sacrifice is the most obvious example, in which females are often depicted transporting jars of blood to the "Other" world or holding down either the Mountain god or prisoners as they are sacrificed. According to de Bock, these parallels exist in Moche iconography: "the Mountain god takes control of the world in many

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[21] For more on this debate between archaeological movements, see the introduction of Barbara Bender. Stonehenge: Making Space. New York: Berg Publishers, 1998.

[22] Edward K. de Bock. Human Sacrifices for Cosmic Order and Regeneration: Structure and Meaning in Moche Iconography, Peru, AD 100-800. Oxford, England: British Archaeological Reports International Series 1429, 2005.

[23] Ibid. pg. 118

battles with creatures from every ecological zone, which ends in the west with a transition to the Other world. The Moche people imitate their god. In ritual battle they establish order and hierarchy and with human sacrifices they try to maintain…contact with the creative powers of the deities…Sacrifice was a source for life."[24] And indeed, de Bock then reasons that the Sacrifice Ceremony is performed by the political elite at the beginning of the wet season in order to ensure a productive agricultural yield, reflecting the political and cosmological order that is required for the regeneration process.

While Bourget and de Bock's formulations are not entirely inconsistent, the discrepancies between them reflect the difficulty of separating the scholar from the interpretation when doing a meaning-based analysis. This is an inevitable consequence of adopting a less scientific methodology, and the lack of a common conceptual framework between scholars makes advancing claims to knowledge about Moche human sacrifice difficult. Unlike the functionalist approaches presented in the first section of this paper, Bourget and de Bock do not share a common definition of variables, agreement on the criteria for analysis, a relatively consistent set of data, or the employment of similar methodologies. Without this consensus, it is nearly impossible to separate knowledge from interpretation, which is invariably influenced by an individual scholar's experiences acquired over a long career or *a priori* assumptions about how the world works. And this is exactly what we see in the two studies on Moche belief systems, where simultaneously two interpretations are offered that cannot entirely coexist: Bourget's tripartite organization of the cosmos and de Bock's structural relationships between different social entities.

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[24] Ibid.

However, there are a number of advantages to employing a meaning-based approach to Moche human sacrifice. Using thick description and contextual evidence, Bourget and de Bock are better positioned to examine the underlying behavioral motivations of social action. This provides a far more powerful theoretical basis from which to approach the function of Moche human sacrifice. While a meaning based-approach may not be very good at devising specific causal mechanisms that can be probed in the archaeological record, it is very good at parsing symbolic systems by contextualizing evidence. Thus, a hermeneutics of culture is well-suited to understand belief as a subject for archaeological inquiry.

The Middle Path

The complementary nature of function and meaning is apparent: functionalism is a problem-oriented approach for understanding the role of human sacrifice in Moche religion and society. A meaning-based approach, on the other hand, is based on thick description and contextualizing evidence in order to account for all-encompassing symbolic/belief systems. These two perspectives result in strikingly different interpretations of Moche human sacrifice -- depending on an archaeologist's research question, he or she might employ one or the other in order to arrive at the preferred account of human sacrifice in the Moche society. However, functionalism and meaning are incomplete by themselves; at this point, I argue that more powerful explanations can be generated by following a course down the "middle path." The paper will now outline the theoretical and practical value of analytical eclecticism.

This integrated approach is best exemplified in Edward Swenson's "Cities of Violence."[25] In the article Swenson argues that human sacrifice was deeply rooted in cosmological principles bound to the exercise of power. In the words of anthropologist Sherry Ortner, Swenson investigates both the ways that "power and meaning are deployed and negotiated, expressed and transformed"[26] and in which "agents induced structural changes identifiable in the material record."[27] In such a way, Swenson grounds his interpretation of the Moche belief system in evidence that can be tested in the field. For example, at sacred places such as temples and ballcourts, political elites carried out sacrificial rituals "deemed crucial for agricultural success and the reproduction of socio-cosmic order,"[28] which sounds very similar to the belief system outlined by de Bock. This "consumptive-reproductive dialect" was characterized by an asymmetrical relationship of reciprocity between humans and the divine, in which the former nourished the latter with blood, who would in turn ensure that the Earth fed humanity. This demanded a form of ritualized warfare between local Moche polities in order to capture enemy warriors for performing human sacrifice, in addition to the construction of extravagant ceremonial centers where the public ritual could take place.

Swenson argues in favor of an "emic functionalist" perspective on the consumptive-reproductive belief system. This middle path approach provides a powerful conceptual framework for approaching the "manipulation of fundamental cosmological principles from which political ideologies were forged and social inequalities

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[25] Edward R. Swenson. "Cities of Violence: Sacrifice, Power, and Urbanization in the Andes." *Journal of Social Archaeology*. 3.2 (2003). Pg. 256-296
[26] Sherry Ortner. Life and Death On Mt.Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. pg. 17
[27] Swenson, 2003. pg. 259
[28] Ibid. pg. 257

legitimated."[29] Religious rituals were infused with meaning that must be understood in order to make sense of the function of human sacrifice on Moche society. Swenson argues that the relationship between politics and violence was instrumental in institutionalizing social inequality in Moche society as well as catalyzing the urbanization of the Andes. This part of the argument is more reminiscent of DeMarrais' paper, with Swenson claiming that the manipulation of ritual violence "provided an important mechanism for both the generation and subsequent institutionalization of social inequality. These processes were fundamental to the emergence of centralized polities."[30] Swenson then makes the case for a feedback system that ensured social stability: the Moche emphasis on reproductive forms of violence such as human sacrifice was vital in determining the urban layout of Moche cities, where ballcourts, pyramids, and temple mounts were constructed to host spectacular ceremonies of ritual sacrifice, which then in turn institutionalized an ideologically-sanctioned political authority.

Swenson's article articulates a powerful explanation of Moche human sacrifice by combining a functionalist and meaning-based analysis. Ideology is not dismissed as inaccessible, which then allows us to examine the complex behavioral motivations that induce social action. From an emic perspective, the consumptive-reproductive political ideology was part of a reciprocal relationship between humanity and the divine; from an etic point of view, this belief system played a large role in consolidating the power of the political authority. By combining function and meaning, archaeologists acknowledge the inherent complexity of human culture. Human sacrifice fulfilled many different roles in Moche society; function and meaning, etic and emic, ought not to be considered mutually

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[29] Ibid. pg. 259
[30] Ibid.

exclusive, but rather complementary. An eclectic perspective therefore offers more nuanced and complex interpretations of Moche human sacrifice that more closely approximates objective historical reality.

Furthermore, Swenson argues that a symbolic/belief system would necessarily leave a mark on the material culture that can be detected in the archaeological record. As long as we consider the real world applications of a Moche belief system, a meaning-based perspective can be scientifically tested in the field. In such a way, Swenson shows that a consumptive-reproductive belief system would have required the presence of massive architectural edifices whose morphology conformed to ideological paradigms.

As was mentioned above, the practice of archaeology is based on interpretation, which can be difficult to separate from an individual scholar's *a priori* biases. However, if we accept that archaeology is fundamentally a scientific endeavor, then integrating function and meaning offers a distinctly pragmatic approach for both retaining positivism while also presenting a means for understanding deep social phenomena such as belief systems. For this reason, the middle path offers explanations of Moche human sacrifice that remain at least partially independent of the scholar's interpretation. In such a way, Swenson has deftly combined the strong points of function and meaning, both preserving the science of archaeology as well as probing deeper into complex social systems.

And so the contours of a new integrative theory of archaeology emerge from the scholarly literature on Moche human sacrifice. The middle path rightly assumes that the function of human sacrifice informs its meaning, and that the meaning of religious ritual determines its function; as such, the middle path approach aspires to offer holistic analyses that take into account the myriad aspects of culture from both an emic and an

etic perspective. This integrative approach acknowledges the inherent complexity of human societies, and argues for viewing alternative explanations as complementary instead of mutually exclusive. For this reason, the middle path perspective can join together many different research questions couched in distinct schools of analysis under the tent of one theoretical framework, and is therefore capable of generating many new and testable hypotheses that advance our understanding of Moche human sacrifice. On the one hand, the middle path is interested in explaining the behavioral motivations of social action through symbolic/belief systems, but it also takes advantage of the practical framework offered by logical positivism that is conducive to scientific progress. While scholars are certainly influenced by prejudice, the middle path argues that archaeologists ought to place a common regard on the importance of reason, evidence, and testable hypotheses when making claims to knowledge in order to separate interpretation from the individual scholar.

We must look at functionalism and a meaning-based approach as two prisms through which to understand the ancient world. Both have theoretical and practical failings in their misrepresentation of the real world; on the other hand, we have no reason to discount one or the other. In reality, human culture is so inherently complex that both theoretical perspectives are at least somewhat correct. As was said in the introduction, if we hedge our bets by exploiting the advantages of one theory while minimizing the disadvantages of the other, we greatly improve our ability to explain a host of social phenomena. For this reason, by following a middle path that integrates function and meaning, archaeologists can significantly advance our understanding of human sacrifice in Moche society.