

Tattooing in Moche Culture: Reconsidering the Identity of the Lady of Cao

In 2005, a group of archeologists led by Régulo Franco Jordán discovered a burial chamber 2.5 meters under the Northwest patio of the Huaca Cao Viejo (part of the El Brujo Complex), located in the Chicama Valley, Peru. The chamber contained the mummy of a tattooed woman dating from approximately 450 AD, who is now referred to as “the Lady of Cao.” This discovery was unprecedented in Moche archeology, given that the mummy was exceptionally well preserved and that it was the first time such a rich burial was found for a woman. The opulence of the offerings, comparable to those of the Lord of Sipán, indicates that the Lady of Cao was of extremely high rank. However, her identity and exact role in Moche society are still a mystery to specialists. The main theory, supported by Franco Jordán, among others, proposes that she was not only a ruler and but also a seer and *curadora* (healer) based on the motifs of her tattoos and some of the objects found inside the mummy bundle. A consideration of other examples of tattoos (in archeological as well as artistic evidence), of representations of *curanderas* in pottery, and of the context in which the body was found indicates that this theory is not entirely convincing. The existing evidence is in fact largely inconclusive, lending itself to alternative possible interpretations.

The Huaca Cao Viejo consists of four superimposed buildings that are almost identical in shape. Approximately every one hundred years, the old building was buried under several meters of adobe, on which the new building was constructed. The burial of the Lady of Cao was found in the second building (ca. 350 AD) underneath the Northwest patio, whose walls are decorated with murals depicting a supernatural being, the “lunar animal,” the Decapitator, and stylized

stingrays and catfish in a textile-like style [figs. 1 and 2]. Inside the burial chamber, beside the mummy bundle lay the skeleton of a young woman who had been strangled with a rope, probably as a sacrifice to the Lady of Cao. Eleven ceramic objects had been deposited as funerary offerings, four of which are Gallinazo style and seven are Early Moche (Mujica Barreda 2007).



Fig. 1. Stingray, lunar animal, and catfish murals in the Northwest patio of the Huaca Cao Viejo.



Fig. 2. Stingray and Decapitator murals in the Northwest corner room.

The mummy bundle of the Lady of Cao was roughly in the shape of a club, measured approximately 181 x 70 x 42 centimeters, and weighted 120 kilograms. The complex assembly of the bundle, which must have been executed by a large number of people, showed signs of great care and planning. Three distinct phases with several layers each have been identified, based on their content and on how certain mantles were arranged. The third or outer phase was covered with a mantle that presented an embroidered human face painted with cinnabar [fig 3]. In fact, significant traces of cinnabar were found throughout the bundle. Under five layers of fabric, specialist found two wooden clubs plated with gilded copper and four diadems with representations of felines [fig. 4]. The first layer of the second phase was also embroidered with a face, and several textile offerings were found distributed among seven layers. The first phase contained the larger amount of offerings, including twenty-three ceremonial wooden spear throwers covered in gilded copper, whose handles were decorated with birds and anthropomorphic figures, and on which the body rested. Textile offerings were also found in this phase, including four dresses made out of cotton, two of which were particularly well preserved. One of them is decorated with intertwined volutes [fig. 5] and the other with stylized catfish, in a similar pattern to the catfish mural in the Northwest patio [fig. 6]. In this layer there were also some elements related to textile production: six gold needles, one copper needle, thirteen cotton buds, and sixty-four wooden spindles. Finally, closest to the body of the Lady of Cao was a mantle covered with metal foils and a gilded copper bowl covering her face (Fernández López 2010).



Fig. 3 Outer layer of the mummy bundle showing an embroidered human face.



Fig. 4 One of the diadems with feline designs that formed part of the funerary offering.



Fig. 5. Cotton dress with volutes design.



Fig. 6. Cotton dress with stylized catfish design.

The Lady of Cao was found lying in a dorsal position, with her arms by her sides, and oriented from North to the South, as was customary in Moche burials. She was adorned with fifteen gold, copper, and semiprecious stone necklaces, a number of copper ear spools with turquoise incrustations, and forty-four nose ornaments made out of gold and silver alloys (Cesáreo et al., 2016) Some of the necklaces feature motifs of human faces and anthropomorphous human faces with feline qualities, similar to those embossed on the diadems.

Perhaps the most impressive jewels are the nose ornaments, all of which have symmetrical figurative representations, usually arranged in pairs of figures. The diverse motifs include various animals (snakes, spiders, scorpions), many of which are aquatic (stingrays, catfish, lobsters, crabs), as well as supernatural beings (such as the Decapitator and lunar animals), and human figures related to warfare or sacrificial rituals (warriors holding clubs and naked captives) [fig. 7]. The opulent adornments and offerings found inside the mummy bundle, along with the extreme care with which the bundle was put together, indicate beyond doubt that the Lady of Cao was of extremely high rank, possibly a ruler or important priestess.



Fig. 7. Six of the forty-four nose rings found inside the mummy bundle.

The copious application of cinnabar (mercury sulfide) throughout the bundle contributed to the exceptional preservation of the mummy, given that it is an antimicrobial agent. However, little about her identity is known with certainty. Based on radiographs and visual examination of the corpse, John Verano has determined that the Lady of Cao was in her mid to late twenties at the time of her death, which was caused by childbirth complications. He explains:

No fetal remains were found in her pelvic area, so if she did die during or shortly after childbirth, it appears that her child survived. Small depressions on her pubic bones indicate that she had already had at least one child. [The] back of her head shows slight flattening, indicating that she was probably cradleboarded as a child. We could observe no signs of injuries, illness, or poor nutrition in her skeleton, indicating that she was in good health most of her life. (quoted in Mujica Barreda 2007, 240)

Especially well preserved were her hair, styled into two customary braids, and her skin, which shows extensive tattooing in her arms, hands, legs, and feet. The pigment was rather superficial and consists mainly of ferrous oxide, which might have been extracted from *jagua* fruits (Vásquez Sánchez et al. 2013). The complex designs include representations of spiders, snakes, birds, lunar animals, geometric figures, and other motifs that have yet to be deciphered [fig. 8].

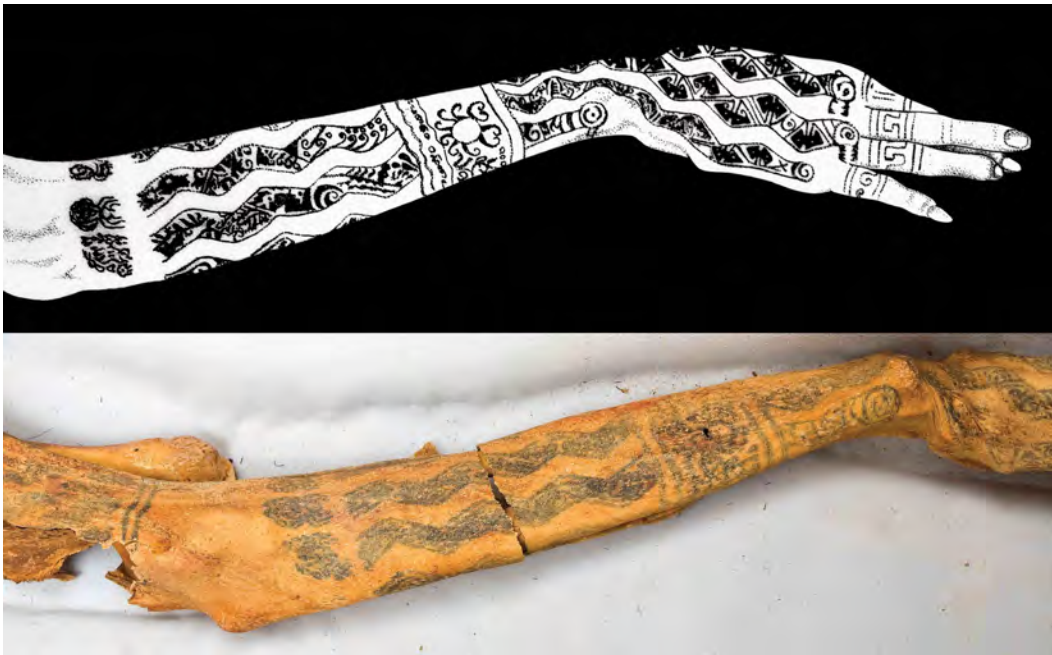
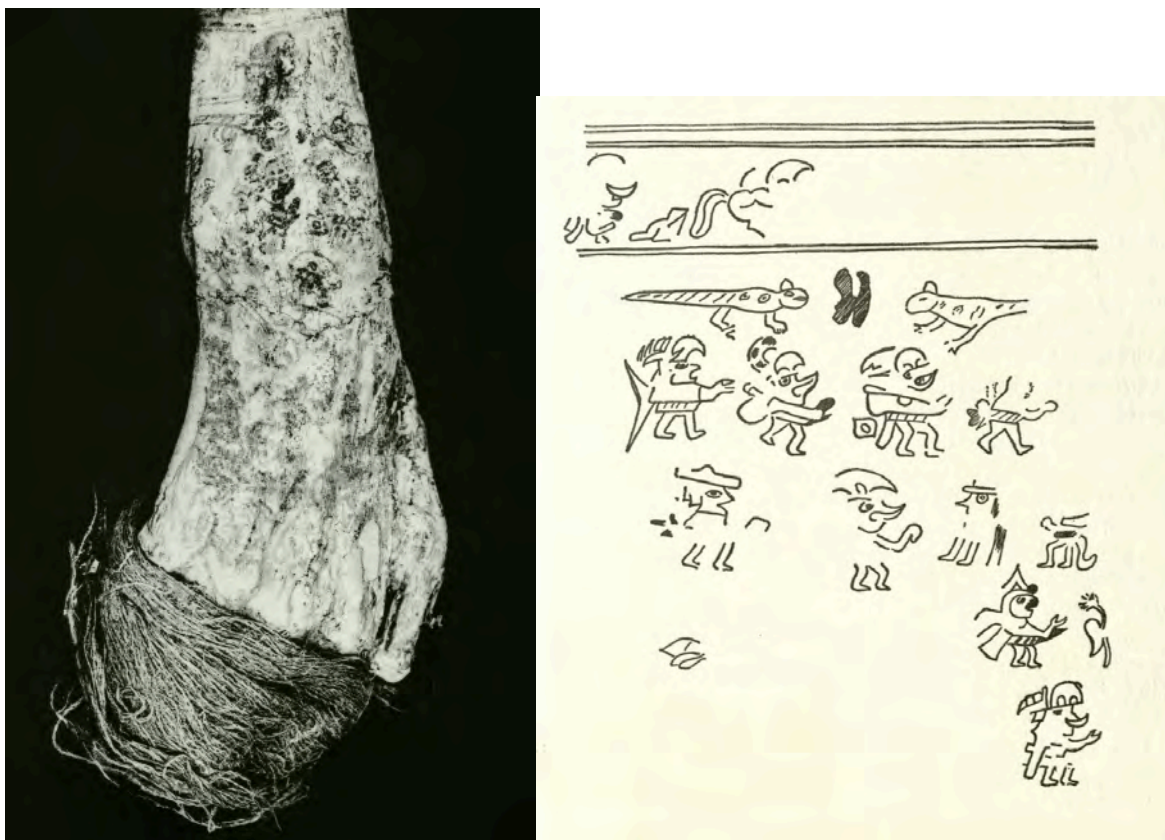


Fig. 8. Tattoos on the right forearm and hand of the Lady of Cao.

The discovery of the Lady of Cao mummy confirms that tattooing was not uncommon among the Moche, as it adds to the preexisting archeological and artistic evidence of this practice. Moreover, the motifs of her tattoos are in many cases the same or at least similar to those in other examples. The mummy of an eighteen-year-old woman of high rank found at Pacatnamú also showed tattoos on her right forearm and hand (the left arm had decomposed) (Ubberlohde-Doering 1966). Since her skin was not as well preserved as the Lady of Cao's, the motifs of her tattoos are for the most part hard to discern. Those that are clearer represent animals, such as a stylized toad and two reptiles (iguanas, perhaps?), and a number of heavily adorned characters, possibly divine or semi-divine [figs. 9 and 10].



Figs. 9 and 10. Tattoos on the right forearm and hand of a mummy found at Pacatnamú.

Tattooing is also suggested in numerous artistic objects. Bone spatulas in the shape of forearms with the hands in what Christopher Donnan calls a “half fist” gesture (Donnan 1976) have carved designs that probably represent tattoos. The motifs in these objects are remarkably similar to those found on the Ubbelohde-Doering mummy or the Lady of Cao. For example, the drawing in figure 11, depicting the decorations on one of these spatulas, shows some similar motifs to those we have already seen: geometric shapes, birds, snakes, stingrays, felines, foxes, war clubs, weapon bundles, captives, and adorned anthropomorphic figures that appear to be performing a sacrificial ritual (likely the Sacrificial Theme).

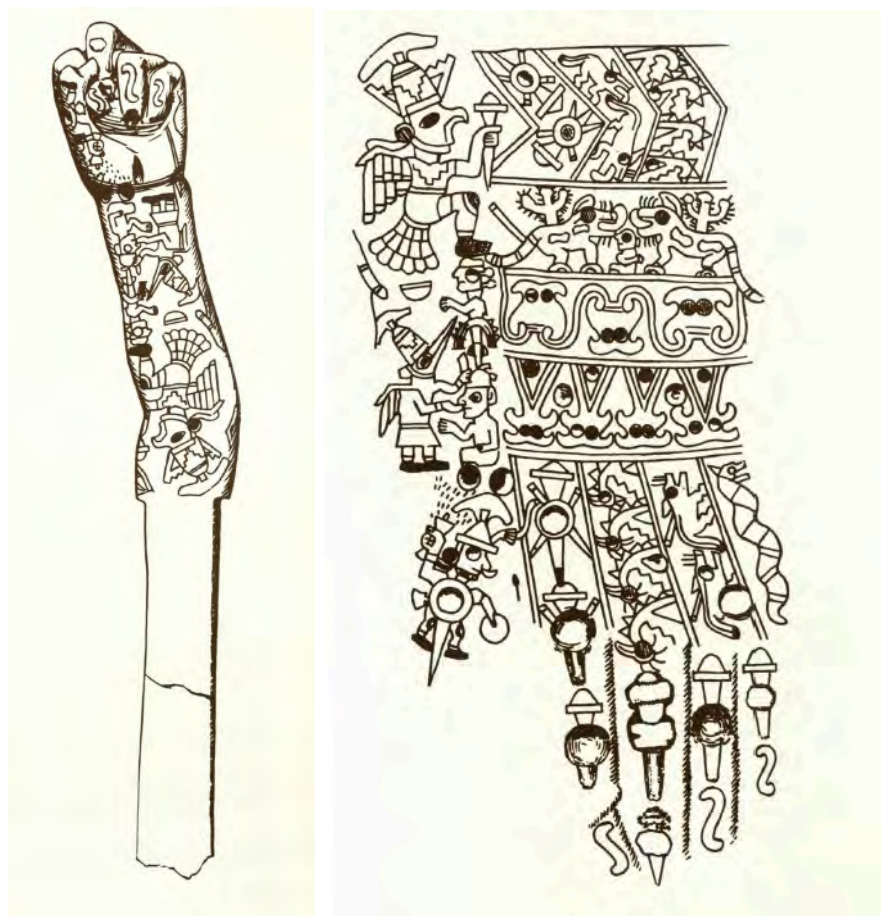


Fig. 11. Drawing of the carved design on a bone spatula.

Furthermore, a large number of ceramic objects show individuals with skin decorations on their faces and/or bodies. In some cases, the designs are painted on the surface of the vessels, while in others they are incised. I would suggest that the former represent body or face paint, while the latter correspond to tattoos. There are several cases of different portrait head pots

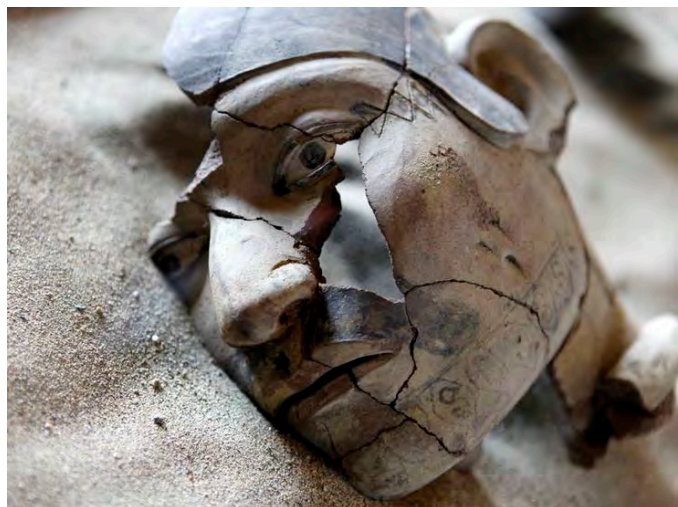


Fig. 12. Unfired clay effigy with painted designs on the jaw and incised designs on the temples.

depicting the same person, each of which has a different design painted on the face. The fact that the decorations vary in portraits of the same person and that in all these cases they are painted clearly indicates that they represent face paint rather than tattoos. Although no similar



Fig. 13. Ceramic vessel showing a man with incised snake designs on his face and with mutilated nose and lips.

examples for incised pottery have been found, there are however some clay effigies that show instances of both paint and incisions within the same piece [fig. 12]. Clearly, this suggests that the decorations are different in nature, which supports the hypothesis that incised and painted motifs represent tattoos and face paint, respectively. While it is possible that the former might signify sacrificial cuts on the skin, there does not seem to be any evidence pointing in this direction. There are examples of other sacrificial alterations of bodies such as mutilation or dismemberment both in art and in

burials [fig. 13]. However, as far as I am aware, there does not seem to be any mummies or artistic representations revealing the practice of cutting motifs into flesh. In fact, among the ceramic objects that have been considered for this discussion, the vast majority of depictions of captives do not exhibit incised decorations. In most cases, this technique appears on figures that do not show any signs of captivity (such as nakedness, ropes, or the “captive hairstyle”). Furthermore, numerous incised motifs are similar to those found on bone spatulas and on the Lady of Cao, such as snakes, birds, stingrays, foxes, and war clubs. In any case, skin decoration, including tattooing, was undoubtedly a widespread practice in Moche culture.

Franco Jordán has tried to interpret the symbolism of the Lady’s tattoos and the contents of her burial chamber in an attempt to determine her identity and role within Moche society. He argues, supported by other specialists, that she was not only a ruler but also a shaman or seer and a *curandera* (Franco Jordán 2009, 2010, 2012, 2015). According to him, “los tatuajes, sin duda, formaban parte del poder espiritual que esta mujer ostentaba en el mundo del chamanismo y/o curanderismo”¹ (2015, 10). In his view, this is clear from the symbolic value of snakes and spiders:

Las figuras tatuadas en los antebrazos de la Señora indican el talento y el poder que poseía, y están cargadas de un alto contenido simbólico. Las figuras de arañas están vinculadas con la propiciación de las lluvias; las figuras de serpientes se asocian a la fertilidad de la tierra. La vinculación de la Señora con estos seres la hacen, sin duda, poseedora de poderes mágico-religiosos. Quizás, incluso, suficientes para predecir las bonanzas o fracasos en la agricultura.² (2009, 35)

¹ “The tattoos undoubtedly formed part of the spiritual power that this woman displayed in the world of shamanism and *curanderismo*.” My translation.

² “The figures tattooed on the Lady’s forearms indicate the talent and power that she possessed, and they are charged with a highly symbolic content. The figures of spiders are linked with the encouragement of rain; the figures of snakes are associated with the fertility of soil. The association between the Lady and these beings undoubtedly make her a bearer of magical-religious powers. Perhaps, even enough to predict bonanzas or failures in agriculture.”

From these quotes, it is unclear why the author assumes that the presence of tattoos signals that she possessed “poderes mágico-religiosos.” There are numerous examples of tattooed individuals in artistic representations that do not suggest in any way that they were shamans or seers. In fact, many of these examples present snake motifs, just like the Lady of Cao. This is not to imply that tattoos of snakes did not have any symbolic value, but rather that the direct association between them and the practices of shamanism and clairvoyance is largely unfounded. While Franco Jordán’s is one possible interpretation, it cannot be asserted “without a doubt,” as he claims.

Related to this hypothesis, he also asserts that the Lady of Cao was a *curadora* or healer:

Estos tatuajes significativos, con mucha carga simbólica, le daban a la Señora de Cao muchos poderes sobrenaturales, quizás para leer el cielo, predecir los cambios climáticos y también para lograr actos de sanación.³ (2012, 22)

He bases his argument not only on the presence of tattoos on her body but also on two particular ceramic pots that show scenes of *curanderismo*. First, he links the Lady of Cao to a figure that



Fig. 14. Ceramic vessel showing a *curandera* with painted designs on her arm.

appears on a Phase III vessel housed in the Museo Cassinelli [fig. 14]. This pot depicts a healer woman with painted designs of snake on her right arm, which she lays on the body of a male patient. For Franco Jordán, the presence of snake motifs on a *curandera*’s forearm reveals that the Lady of Cao also had healing

³ “These significant, highly symbolic tattoos gave the Lady many supernatural powers, perhaps even to read the sky, predict changes in the weather, and achieve acts of healing.”

powers, given that she also has these motifs on the same part of the body (2012). Nevertheless, as we have seen, snakes are a common motif in skin decorations, and it also appears on individuals that are not shown to have healing capacities in any way. The decoration of forearms is also a common occurrence, appearing on individuals with varying attributes. Moreover, if our premise about the difference between painted and incised skin designs were correct, that would mean that the forearm decorations on the Museo Cassinelli pot do not correspond to tattoos, but to body paint. Besides, forearm decoration does not seem to be a necessary attribute of healer figures. There are numerous ceramic objects that depict scenes of *curanderismo* involving individuals with no skin decorations whatsoever.

Second, he presents an Early Moche kaolin vessel found in the burial chamber of the Lady of Cao [fig. 15] as a supporting element to his claim that she was a *curandera*. The object depicts a medicine woman laying her hand on an infant, who is being nursed by her mother. She can be recognized as a healer due to her hand gesture and to the cloak she wears over her head, both of which are customary in scenes of this kind. Franco Jordán adds that she exhibits an abnormally thin right arm, which according to him also helps to identify her as a *curandera* on the basis of other healers presenting the same characteristic (2012, 2015). If this is correct, one would expect the Lady of Cao to have suffered from a similar physical anomaly. There are however no indications that this was the case. According to John Verano, the only ailment the body presented was a carious lesion in one of her wisdom teeth (quoted in Mujica Barreda 2007, 240). Furthermore, the garments found as offerings inside the mummy bundle, which she probably wore in life, do not show similarities to those worn by healers in artistic representations. Arabel Fernández López, the archeologist who was in charge of the unwrapping of the mummy bundle, states that the garments found were rectangular dresses with openings for

the arms and head (2010). Finally, the kaolin pot shows signs of use and appears to have been created considerably long before Lady of Cao's death (Mujica Barreda 2007), which indicates that it was not made specifically for her funeral. It might therefore show a scene from her childhood, in which she was herself treated by a healer.



Fig. 15. Kaolin vessel found in the burial chamber of the Lady of Cao, showing a *curandera* laying her arm on an infant.

The shamanism / *curanderismo* hypothesis is thus not entirely convincing, as the evidence is clearly inconclusive. Indeed, it allows for alternative possible interpretations. I would propose that they could suggest she was involved in some kind of ritual related to sacrifice and warfare, based the iconography seen in Lady of Cao's tattoos and body ornaments. The iconography therein shown is often associated to scenes of captivity, sacrifice, and warfare in a manner consistent with that found in some works of pottery and buildings, including the Huaca Cao Viejo.

The largest collection of iconographic motifs coming from the burial of the Lady of Cao resides in the finely crafted nose ornaments. Jeffrey Quilter explains that these are “a distinctively male status symbol, while the spear throwers also reference the male activities of



Fig. 16. Ceramic vessel depicting a naked captive with a rope around his neck, that ends in a snake biting his penis.

hunting and warfare” (2014, 180). Among them we find a nose ornament depicting two warriors standing back to back, holding clubs and circular shields. There is also another piece showing two naked male captives, with ropes around their necks, who have been tied to a Y-shaped structure. A third ornament depicts the figure of the Decapitator, a character undeniably related to sacrifice. This figure is characterized, among other things, by having spider legs protruding from his torso, which might indicate a link between the spider tattoos on the Lady’s forearm and him. It is important to note, as well, that the Decapitator

decorates one of the murals in the Northwest patio of the Huaca. Snakes, arguably the main motif of the Lady’s tattoos, appear in several nose ornaments (sometimes with feline attributes),

including the one with the Decapitator motif. Albeit snakes might possibly be symbolically associated with fertility, as Franco Jordán states, they are likely also related to death and sacrifice. Not only do they appear by the Decapitator’s sides in the aforementioned jewel, they are also present in a number of ceramic bottles depicting male captives with ropes around their necks that end in snakes biting their genitals [fig. 16]. Other nose ornaments show stingrays and lunar animals, both of which appear in the Lady’s tattoos as well as in the Huaca’s murals.



Fig. 17. Ceramic vessel depicting a feline attacking a naked captive.

Furthermore, as it has already been mentioned, the four diadems and some of the necklaces found inside the mummy bundle depict feline animals and humans with feline attributes. Felines are often shown attacking captives in artistic representations, such as the ceramic vessel in figure 17 and in the bone spatula carving [fig. 10]. The two ceremonial golden war clubs that accompanied the body of the Lady of Cao probably also point to warfare, as they often appear in such scenes, either in the hands of warriors or in weapon bundles. Interestingly, headdresses with feline motifs, war clubs, and nose rings are often seen worn by figures performing sacrifices in various images, for instance in the Sacrifice Theme (although this is a later image). Moreover, the iconography here described corresponds to that of some murals at Huaca Cao Viejo and Huaca de la Luna. This is significant because these two structures are thought to have had a ritualistic function related to warfare and sacrifice, due precisely to their wall decorations and to the discovery of skeletons of sacrificial victims under their plazas (Bourget 2001, 180). In this way, the motifs that appear in the Lady's tattoos and metal ornaments suggest that she might have played an important role in warfare and sacrificial rituals. Although it is not possible to assert this with absolute certainty, I would argue that it is a more plausible interpretation than the shamanism / *curanderismo* hypothesis.

The level of opulence of the Lady of Cao burial was unprecedented for a woman, which prompted specialists to seek explanations about her identity. The current main theory asserts that the Lady was a shaman and a *curandera* with clairvoyant and healing powers. Nonetheless, a close analysis of the available evidence, particularly in terms of iconography, indicates that this theory is not definitive, but in fact rather unconvincing. The inconclusive evidence allows for different interpretations, which shows that further research is needed in order to identify the role

of this high rank woman with a higher degree of certainty. The puzzling discovery of the Lady of Cao thus prompts us to question and revise much of our understanding about Moche culture.

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