<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of Participants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preface</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Europe</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Kurtz’s Compound:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headhunting and the Human Body in Prehistoric Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ian Armit</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle East</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity in Context:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plain, Painted and Modeled Skulls from the Neolithic Middle East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Michelle Bonogofsky</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Ahead:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring Meanings of Skulls in the Neolithic Near East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Karina Croucher</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eurasia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastered Skulls of the Catacomb Culture in the Northern Pontic Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Elke Kaiser</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decoration of Skulls:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funerary Rituals of the Yamnaya and Catacomb Cultures in the Eurasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Natalia I. Shishlina</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Yenisei Mummies with Modeled Skulls and Masks from Siberia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Elga B. Võdetskaia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oceania</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Taphonomy of Cranial Modification in Papua New Guinea:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for the Archaeology of Mortuary Ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ann L. W. Stodder</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New World</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moche Skulls in Cross-Cultural Perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Erica Hill</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Trophy” Heads in Prehistoric Peru:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wari Imperial Influence on Nasca Head-Taking Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Corina M. Kellner</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skulls Collected for Scalping in the Gran Chaco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Marcela Mendoza</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmortem Skeletal Modifications of the Pre-Columbian North American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>C. Scott Speal</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstracts</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethnographic and archaeological fieldwork worldwide have yielded abundant evidence for the centrality of the human head and skull in ritual, symbolism, iconography and performance. Skull modification, decoration, representation and deposition may take similar forms cross-culturally given material constraints. These constraints provide the basis for categorization, which facilitates comparative work on the human skull and, by extension, the recognition of cross-cultural or diachronic patterning in the archaeological record. The identification of such patterning is thus a prerequisite to explanation informed by ethnographic analogy and the reconstruction of meanings attached to the objects. Through such work, we may gain a better understanding of past human conceptual systems, especially as they relate to ritual practice, symbolism and embodiment.

Below I identify six functions of human heads or skulls culled from the ethnographic and archaeological literature from the Americas and Europe. I have taken a broad-based ethnological approach, using examples from cultures unrelated in time or space. These data are intended for comparative purposes, so that as archaeologists, we may familiarize ourselves with the ways in which humans have manipulated the skull cross-culturally. This basic knowledge may be used to generate new hypotheses that may be tested against the archaeological record in a given region or site. These data are also intended to serve as illustrations of the richness of the human body as a conceptual field, one that is common to all human communities.

In the second part of this discussion, I provide an example of how a specific prehistoric culture, the Moche of the North Coast of Peru (AD 100–800), utilized human skulls. The Moche were one of the most innovative prehistoric American cultures in their use of human body parts, which appear in two- and three-dimensional art and iconography, as offerings and in unusual depositional contexts. Using contextual evidence from Moche sites in combination with the analysis of fineline painting on ceramics, I argue that human skulls were collected and curated by female ritual specialists for use as offerings in what appear to be rituals of ancestor veneration. Such rituals are associated with a recurring set of images, including birds, gabled roof structures and a variety of vessel forms.

Functions of human heads and skulls

When encountered archaeologically or in an ethnographic context, the human head or skull is subject to a number of often competing interpretations. For example, modified human skulls and mandibles recovered on Kodiak Island and in southeast Alaska have been interpreted as trophy heads (de Laguna 1933), shaman’s amulets or charms, and as objects used in ancestor veneration (Urcid 1994: 119). The following list provides a starting point for analysis of the head or skull as material culture by identifying the most common emic explanations and etic interpretations of function. The following six functions include the head or skull as a way to ward off evil (apotropaic); as shorthand for the entire person (synecdoche); as an object imbued with spiritual or supernatural power (cathexis); as a mnemonic device (an aid to memory); as an object to facilitate forgetting; and as a dedicatory offering.

Apotropaic
The idea that the human head or skull has apotropaic properties, i.e., the ability to ward off evil or misfortune, has been documented by Catherine Allen among Quechua speakers of Sonqo, Peru. Some Sonqueños curate the bones of deceased relatives; in one case, Allen (2002: 41) recorded that a skull located in a niche in a storeroom was believed to protect the contents.

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A related belief is that the body of the deceased might harbor dangerous forces and, through appropriate treatment such as decapitation, the danger or threat may be averted (Todd 1987: 185). Barber’s (1988) study of the postmortem treatment of supposed European vampires illustrates the variety of ways in which human remains may be manipulated for apotropaic purposes. The treatment of the head among the Jívaro of the lowlands of eastern Ecuador, documented in the 1950s, may also be considered apotropaic; the heads of enemies were known to contain an avenging soul (muiskak) that must be properly released in order to
prevent death or mishap. Proper treatment involved decapitation of the enemy, curation and rubbing charcoal on the head in order to blind the soul inside (Harner 1962: 264–265; see also Taylor 1993).

**Synecdoche**

A second function of the head or skull is synecdoche, a term of Greek origin in which a selected body part represents the whole. The idea of the trophy head is generally consistent with the concept of synecdoche when the skull or head of the deceased is curated or displayed in order to demonstrate prowess in warfare. Examples include the Ohio Hopewell (50 BC–AD 350) of eastern North America (Seeman 1988) and the Iron Age Celts (450–100 BC). Petres (1972: 379) has interpreted deposits of the heads of warrior-age males from the Iron Age in Hungary as synecdochical; that is, the male head is a sort of shorthand for the entire warrior. The Gaulish Iron Age practice of hanging the heads of defeated warriors from the necks of horses—a practice documented by Classical observers and generally interpreted as a way of displaying portable evidence of success in combat—is another example of synecdoche (Green 2001: 95–96).

The trophy heads associated with the prehistoric Paracas (900 BC–AD 200) and Nasca cultures (100 BC–AD 700) of southern Peru may also have been used synecdochically. Numerous naturally mummified human heads with evidence of decapitation have been recovered, primarily in funerary (DeLeonardis 2000; Paul 2000) and cache contexts (Browne et al. 1993). Many of the Nasca heads were modified by enlarging the foramen magnum, perforating the frontal bone, inserting a wooden toggle and attaching a rope for suspension (Proulx 2001; Williams et al. 2001), presumably for display.

A synecdochical function is also consistent with the use of the skull or head of the deceased as an object of veneration. In situations in which the preservation or maintenance of the deceased’s body in toto is impossible or inconvenient, the skull, one of the most identifiable skeletal elements in the human body (Becker 1988: 126), may be retrieved after death and venerated in place of the entire person.

**Cathectic**

A third function of the head is as a cathected object, such as a charm or talisman. Cathected objects are those believed to be imbued with supernatural power or energy. The relics of saints are examples of cathected objects; some medieval Europeans believed that the merest hair or bone fragment of a saint could cure illness or confer good fortune. One source of the relic’s value was the association of a supernatural event, such as a vision of the saint or the performance of a miracle, with the location of the saint’s remains (Geary 1994: 200–205). Once identified as relics, the heads of saints were decorated, ensnried and visited by the faithful seeking cures or good fortune because the relics were believed to be efficacious (Bynum and Gerson 1997).

In some South American cultures, the head was believed to contain or embody special powers of benefit to the one who took the head or possessed it. During the nineteenth century, the Munduruku of the upper Tapajós River of eastern Brazil reportedly curated the heads of their enemies and used them as talismans to increase the availability of game animals (Murphy 1959: 1024–1025). Like the relics of European saints, the heads used by the Munduruku were cathected objects, thought to be imbued with powers that benefited those who owned or sought contact with them.

**Mnemonic device**

The mnemonic roles of architecture, monuments and specific artifact classes are becoming increasingly familiar subjects of study in archaeology (e.g., various chapters in Van Dyke and Alcock 2003; Williams 2003a). The body as a site of memory is already well-established in European ethnography (e.g., Hallam and Hockey 2001; Seremetakis 1991; Verdery 1999) and medieval archaeology (e.g., Williams 2001, 2003b). Just as the entire corpse may function as a site for the construction or transformation of memory, so too may the head function as a mnemonic device. The head or skull of the deceased may be decorated, curated and otherwise manipulated during ritual performances in which either the deceased as an individual, or the deceased as an unnamed member of the community of ancestors, is invoked, commemorated and petitioned. The classic example of the head as a memento of an ancestor is the plastered Neolithic skulls of the Near East (7,200–6,000 BC for the Levant). Kathleen Kenyon (1957) was the first to propose that these skulls served as “mementos,” although recent research indicates that skulls fulfilled multiple functions in ancient Near Eastern mortuary ritual, including their possible use as fertility or apotropaic devices (Bonogofsky 2001, 2003, 2004; Parker Pearson 1999: 159–161).

Decapitated Nasca heads are another example of the possible use of heads or skulls as mnemonic devices to facilitate ancestor veneration. Pointing to the well-documented practice of preserving the bodies of the ancestral dead among the Incas and care-taking of the dead by modern Quechua speakers in the Andes (e.g., Allen 2002: 40–43), scholars such as Carmichael, have postulated that the Nasca employed trophy heads as “generic referencers[s] to the collective ancestors and their life-giving powers” (Carmichael 1994: 84). The curation of the head, then, reminded the keeper of the central role of the ancestors in maintaining the community.

**Object of forgetting**

A fifth function is the inverse of a mnemonic device; that is, the head is manipulated so as to create an object with which to forget or erase the social identity or memory of
the deceased. Forty (1999) provides a number of twentieth-century examples in which objects, ranging from war memorials to tombs and “ephemeral monuments,” facilitate the process of forgetting. Performance, in tandem with material objects, is essential to the ritual process in which a new social reality is constructed and the old is forgotten or transformed (Schieffelin 1985). The performative aspects of forgetting may involve the public manipulation of the corpse in order to erase identity or to convert individual biographies into collective memories (Williams 2003b: 233).

Among many twentieth-century native Amazonians, the physical modification of the corpse is a prerequisite to forgetting (Oakdale 2001; Taylor 1993). The Wari of western Brazil, for example, explain their dismemberment and cannibalism of the deceased as a service to the family, as a way to remove the “focus of remembering” (Conklin 2001: 174–175) and obliterate the body as a tangible link between the deceased and surviving kin. Among the Tupian Araweté, who live along the Xingu River in north central Brazil, forgetting is associated with decomposition of the flesh. The liminal period following death is a dangerous period in which community members temporarily abandon the village and mourners observe taboos on singing, painting and sexual relations. A few months later, graves are re-opened to ensure that soft tissues have decomposed. Thereafter, the area surrounding the grave is regarded with indifference and mourners resume their usual activities (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 197–201). For the Araweté, as long as the flesh persists, the living are able to maintain a tangible connection to the deceased. Once the bones are exposed when the grave is reopened though, the living are able to reconceptualize the deceased as part of the world of the dead, thus “forgetting” their painful loss.

These ethnographic examples demonstrate how central to the process of forgetting the condition of the body and body parts are among Amazonian communities, however, archaeological examples lend support for the idea that the manipulation of body parts, including the skull, can facilitate forgetting and transformation. At a Late Classic Maya site located in Colha, Belize and dated to AD 800 to 850, a total of thirty skulls were cached in a pit following decapitation of the victims, which included ten men, ten women and ten children (Massey 1989). The equal proportions of these probable intentional, as this skull cache may represent the Colha elite and the erasure of their presence at the site following their loss of power to invasion or rebellion (Mock 1998). The placement of skulls in a prepared pit, possibly within a public and performative ritual context, was a powerful act of denial that employed the head or skull as a synecdochical object of censure. In this example, the skulls symbolized the obliteration of the entire elite person. Caching facilitated “forgetting” the personhood of the deceased and enabled the skulls to be transformed into symbols of regeneration, as is represented in a Maya sculpture from Palenque in which a maize plant issues from a skull (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991: 33).

Dedicated offering
A final function of the skull is that of dedicated offering. The use of humans as offerings in the Andean region, usually within the context of human sacrifice, has been documented both by early Spanish chroniclers and by recent archaeological research. For example, the Akapana, a monumental pyramid at the site of Tiwanaku (AD 500–1,150) in the Bolivian highlands, has yielded numerous human remains, including isolated skulls. Based on the architectural context and the lack of grave furniture, the excavators interpreted the remains as dedicated offerings associated with either the initiation of new construction or the ritual closure of portions of an older structure (Blom and Janusek 2004; Manzanilla and Woodard 1990).

As Verano has noted (2001: 167), the interment of skulls and other skeletal elements in ceremonial architecture was a relatively common practice in the Andean region. While the manipulation of some human remains can be attributed to sacrificial ritual, the retrieval, curation and deposition of some skeletal elements suggests an alternative function—that of cathected offering, a topic that I address in greater detail below.

The six functions of the human head or skull identified above are not mutually exclusive. In other words, human heads may be used in multiple ways by a single cultural group. For example, while synecdoche appears to be one function of Nasca heads, the variety of contexts in which the heads occur archaeologically indicates that the synecdochical function coexists with other functions, i.e., the head as cathected object or mnemonic device. Attention to depositional context and artifactual associations are key to unraveling the complex meanings embodied by the human head archaeologically and identifying a particular use within a given context.

Interpretation is greatly complicated, however, by the fact that archaeological signatures of the functions discussed above often overlap. For example, the use of an object as a charm or talisman by one community member may require that it be removed from sight or contact with others. Such a function could result in a depositional context similar to that observed at the Maya site of Colha, in which the caching of the heads of elites was intended to transform the memory of their presence. In sum, the archaeological evidence for the manipulation of the human skull is consistently incomplete, biased and ambiguous. The greater our comparative database and our attention to contextual detail is, the better our chances of formulating accurate interpretations that incorporate all available evidence.
The skull as cathedected offering among the Moche of Peru

As with examples from the Maya region (e.g., McAnany 1995), dedicatory offerings among the complex societies of South America tend to be incredibly diverse in terms of context, and age, sex and completeness of the deceased’s remains (Verano 1995). Further, identifying the recipient of the dedication has proven challenging, especially when written sources are unavailable, as they are for all Andean societies prior to the Inca.

Many scholars have pointed to the importance of “ancestors” in the daily lives and, more specifically, mortuary practices of ancient Peruvians (e.g., Buikstra 1995; Hasting 2003; Salomon 1995) in an effort to explain artifactual patterning or evidence for certain ritual practices. In a 2002 Antiquity article, James Whitley charged that there are simply “too many ancestors” in prehistory. He suggested that ancestors are steadily becoming the unjustified explanation for everything from the location of monumental architecture to the structure of chambered tombs. Whitley’s charge could be leveled at many interpretations of the Andean past, and his concerns should be taken as a challenge to archaeologists to provide better support for their conjectures about the roles of ancestors in prehistoric South America. With Whitley’s caveat in mind, I examined the iconography of Moche vessels depicting disembemnt, sacrifice and isolated heads in light of archaeological finds of human skulls. Four images often co-occur in these depictions: female figures, birds, gabled structures and ceramic vessels. I argue below that these images depict the collection, curation and offering of human remains, including skulls, to ancestors who are sometimes shown seated beneath gabled roof structures.

The Moche

The Moche inhabited the irrigated river valleys of the North Coast of Peru between about AD 100 and 800 (Figure 1). They constructed monumental architecture in semi-urban settlements, grew a variety of crops in addition to maize, beans, and squash, and lived in the midst of a landscape animated by supernaturals and the omnipresent dead. Relations with deities and, as I shall argue, with ancestors, were mediated by a complex ritual system based on reciprocity and managed by ritual specialists and attendants. One of the offerings demanded by those who had become the revered dead—the ancestors—was human sacrifice (Bourget 1997, 2001). Sacrifice as practiced by the Moche, yielded not only blood, which Bourget has demonstrated was consumed in ceramic goblets (Bourget and Newman 1998), but also body parts, including human heads.

Skeletal evidence

I have suggested elsewhere (Hill 2003) that Moche ritual sacrifice transformed the living body into a vehicle through which ritual specialists communicated with deities or ancestors. The first stages of this ritual involved the sacrificial death of warrior-age males, for which we have abundant archaeological evidence at the site of Huaca de la Luna in the Moche Valley. Many recovered skulls displayed fractures that resulted from blunt-force trauma (Verano 2001: 181), while cervical vertebrae displayed cut marks consistent with the slitting of the throat (Verano 2001: 178) and exsanguination. Similar cut marks were reported on the cervical vertebrae associated with human skulls recovered at the site of Dos Cabezas in the Jequetepeque Valley (Cordy-Collins 2001).

Following sacrifice, some bodies were dismembered, a practice that I have interpreted as the partitioning of the human ritual vessel into sacra, or sacred objects suitable for use as dedicatory offerings (Hill 2003). The heads or skulls of the deceased became one form of sacra—perhaps the most efficacious sort. The contexts in which these skulls are found is key to identifying their function. Some of the individuals recovered from the Huaca de la Luna site were missing their skulls. Excavators have not ruled out taphonomic processes as the reason the elements are missing (Verano 2001: 181); however, collection and curation is another possibility. As the examples below illustrate, skulls and other body parts were deposited by the Moche following removal of the elements from the body of the deceased. These individual skeletal elements are recovered with increasing frequency at Moche sites (Hecker and Hecker 1992; Millaire 2004).

The first example involves the crania of two young adult males (Figure 2) recovered from a niche context in Urban Sector 8 at the site of Moche, located on the sandy plain in front of monumental adobe pyramid, the Huaca de la Luna. The niche was located in an elite residential compound. The crania were both modified by defleshing and removal of portions of the cranial vaults. On the basis of the niche context and modification, Verano and colleagues suggested that these crania were functionally distinct from Nasca “trophy” heads and were probably offerings (Verano et al. 1999). Niches occur in late Moche architecture (see e.g., Donnan 1972; Shimada 1994: Figures 8.22, 8.23), and appear commonly in tombs of the elite, where they house offerings contained in ceramic and gourd vessels (Alva 2001; Alva and Donnan 1993; Castillo and Donnan 1994). Thus, the niche context of the crania is consistent with how offerings are deposited in Moche tombs. Hasting (2003: 318, 324) has discussed the use of niches at the site of Chiripa in the Titicaca Basin and described a generalized Andean phenomenon of niche use for the ritual treatment of human remains, including burial and veneration.

Perhaps the most significant single find to date of human skulls in a secure archaeological context is the eighteen skulls found in a chamber at the site of Dos Cabezas in the Jequetepeque Valley on the Peruvian North Coast (Cordy-Collins 2001: 28–29). Cut marks on the cervical vertebrae
indicate that the victims had their throats slit. The articulation of the mandibles and the presence of cervical vertebrae in correct anatomical position support the contention that the severed heads were still flesh-covered when deposited.

Subfloor deposits of human remains recovered at the Moche V site of Pampa Grande represent a final archaeological example. Shimada (1994: 240–241, Figure 9.16) reported a higher than expected frequency of cranial remains as well as a cranial fragment with “apparently cut and smoothed edges” from a residential and craft production sector at Pampa Grande, located in the Lambayeque Valley. He suggested that the remains could have been collected and curated following ritual sacrifice of a victim and later used as offerings (Shimada 1994: 240).

The skulls recovered from the sites of Moche and Dos Cabezas were apparently recovered from the deceased prior to skeletonization. The evidence of defleshing on the skulls from Moche and the articulation of the cervical spine at Dos Cabezas support the contention that collection and manipulation were perimortem events, rather than stages in an extended burial program in which the deceased was interred, the body skeletonized and mourners or attendants returned to the site of burial to recover skeletal elements. The evidence for the handling and curation of fleshed remains identified by bioarchaeologists is paralleled in the detailed iconography of Moche fineline painted pottery.
**Skull Collection, Modification and Decoration**

**Iconographic evidence**

Moche fineline painting on ceramics and three-dimensional molded vessels have yielded abundant data on ritual, including information on human sacrifice. Representations of hand-to-hand combat depict warriors fighting with shields and clubs (e.g., Donnan and McClelland 1999: Figures 3.29, 3.37, 3.49); other vessels show defeated warriors in procession with their captors (e.g., Donnan and McClelland 1999: Figures 4.2, 4.7) or seated and bound in modeled form (e.g., Donnan 1978: 36). The sacrifice of these defeated warriors was the next step in this ritual process (Donnan 1975), which involved slitting the throat and decapitation. Some fineline vessels depict dismemberment as well. **Figure 3** shows the decapitation and dismemberment of a defeated prisoner, represented partially clothed and flanked by two female figures. A smaller, seated figure is located on the right, beneath a roofed structure and accompanied by two vessels. On the left, a decapitated head “floats” with a rope extending from the mouth and, presumably, the trachea. Legs and arms with ropes tied around ankles and wrists are also represented. Other painted examples depict similar scenes (e.g., Donnan and McClelland 1999: Figure 4.85). Note that in this scene, the head of the deceased is fully fleshed.

**Figure 4.** Naked men, presumably prisoners, run across a mountainous landscape. Body parts, including two arms, a leg and a head surround them. The head, located upside down in the center of the rollout image, appears to be trailing blood from the neck or throat. Three birds, dressed as women wearing tunics and sashes, also appear in this image. On the far left, two women sit beneath a roofed structure with a ceramic vessel above them.

**Figure 5** is a complex image that represents prisoners processing to the left toward an elaborately dressed elite seated within a structure atop a stepped pyramid. This figure is holding a goblet which, presumably, contains the blood of exsanguinated prisoners. In the upper right, a prisoner is being decapitated. His head is pulled back by two figures. There are seven birds in this image, usually hovering above or near the naked prisoners. These birds are again dressed in women’s clothing—wearing tunics and sashes. A decapitated head is depicted in the lower register to the right. In the center of the upper register, a woman offers a vessel to a seated figure beneath a roofed structure. This image, and the previous illustrations, consistently depict prisoners, decapitated heads, women, birds and a roofed structure with a seated figure.

The structures, I suggest, are shrines in which offerings to the ancestors were made. The individuals seated at the back of the structures in **Figures 3, 4, and 5** are the ancestors, possibly naturally mummified, who were ritually sustained with offerings provided in a variety of ceramic vessels by the women. I interpret these women, dressed in simple tunics with sashes, as ritual attendants who played an essential role in the collection of human remains from dismembered and decapitated prisoners. The association of women and birds, which Schaffer has identified as vultures (Schaffer 1983: 40), is not coincidental. The bird attendants depicted in **Figure 5** may actually be women dressed as vultures. Schaffer notes their frequent appearance in images of sacrifice and interprets them as “low-status helpers” functioning as disposers of dead bodies in a way that parallels the role of vultures in an ecosystem (Schaffer 1983: 42).

**Discussion**

Fineline Moche iconography depicts the ritual sacrifice and decapitation of Moche prisoners. Bioarchaeological analysis of skulls from Moche sites demonstrates that the human head was collected, defleshed and curated. Taken together, these two lines of evidence indicate that, for the Moche, the human head functioned both as an offering to the ancestors and as a cathected object. Thus, the Moche use of the human head reflects two functions of skulls identified above: cathectic, the idea that a body part is imbued with a powerful and efficacious spiritual essence; and dedicatory offering, the provision of an object of value to a recipient, often ancestral and/or supernatural.
Elsewhere I have argued that the ritual process of sacrifice and dismemberment produced a cathected object—the body of the deceased. Moche ritual specialists then partitioned that body into useable pieces suitable for dedicatory offerings (Hill 2003). Thus, the use of the head or skull as a dedicatory offering was contingent upon sacrifice, which invested the body part with power and meaning. The cathected quality of the head made it qualitatively different from other sorts of offerings, such as food items recovered in tomb contexts. Maize, peanuts, and beans, for example, were identified as botanical offerings in thirty Moche burials at the site of Pacatnamu (Gumerman 1997). Since these offerings were probably intended to have a utilitarian function, i.e., as food for the dead, they may not have needed to be cathected. In other words, they were already suitable as food, and therefore a ritual was not required to make them efficacious.

Human body parts, however, were probably not naturally efficacious as offerings. If any body part and any deceased individual was acceptable as an offering, I would expect that the bodies of the recently dead would have been routinely dismembered and cannibalized for gifts to the ancestors. This is not the case among the Moche, who appear to have routinely interred individuals of all ages, intact, in extended position in coffins and tombs. Clearly, then, not just any body part and not just any deceased individual was appropriate for the ancestors. Ancestors appear to have desired offerings from sacrificed male prisoners, but this inference will require reexamination as the deposits at sites such as Dos Cabezas are reported more fully.

In conclusion, the Moche example demonstrates how iconography can be employed in tandem with bioarchaeological evidence to determine how human heads or skulls functioned in the past. In seeking a broader cultural

Figure 4. Naked prisoners running across a mountainous landscape. Note the birds dressed as women at the top of the image and on the left. Body parts “float” above the prisoners. After Kutscher (1983: Figure 124).

Figure 5. Prisoners process toward an elite atop a stepped pyramid. Note the decapitated head in the lower right and the female figure carrying a burden on her back in the bottom center. After Kutscher (1983: Figure 123).
context for the Moche use of skulls, I have identified six ways that humans groups cross-culturally have utilized the head and skull. Although the Moche appear to have used skulls as cathected, dedicatory offerings, the other four functions—apotropaisms, synedcoche, mnemonic device, and as an object of forgetting—may prove fruitful avenues for research for other scholars in the study of ritual and religion in the human past.

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