





WATER SNAKES AND KILLER SPIDERS

**DECIPHERING A NEW FRIEZE IN PERU'S
1,500-YEAR-OLD TEMPLE OF THE MOON**

An extraordinary polychromed relief recently found within the Temple of the Moon—a massive ceremonial complex on Peru's arid North Coast—is providing a window into the ceremonial life of the Moche, whose culture flourished in the early first millennium A.D. in the many river valleys that crisscross this desert region. Excavated by Riccardo Morales and Santiago Uceda of the University of Trujillo, the frieze is adorned with images of serpents, mythical two-headed beasts, warriors, and axe-wielding spiders. According to the duo, the figures are associated with the so-called sacrifice ceremony, a well-known iconographic program often depicted in Moche art.

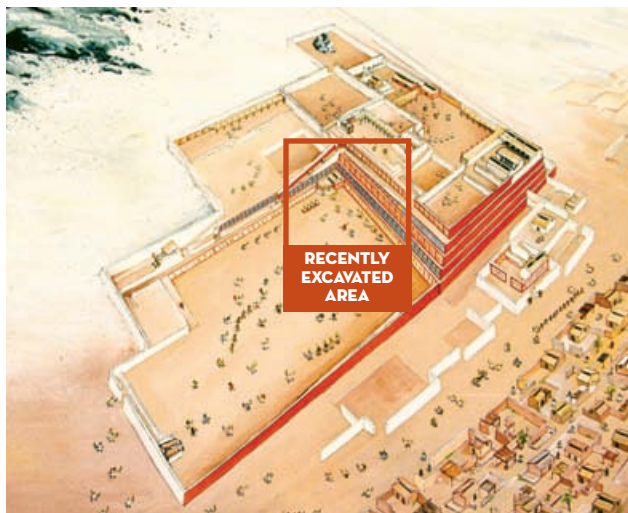
Although the Moche did not have a writing system, they did develop a stylized canon of religious iconography that was often painted on or modeled in ceramic, incised on metal objects, or woven in cloth. The sacrifice ceremony was a state-sponsored event at which prisoners of war were sacrificed and their blood ritually consumed to ensure fertility and the continued cycle of life. Moche royalty often took part in the rituals, assuming the roles of the protagonists in the story. Paraphernalia for the ceremony, including goblets and war clubs bearing scenes from the ceremony, has been found in royal burials at the Moche sites of Sipán and San José de Moro just to the north.

Composed of a suite of structures built entirely of mudbrick, one atop the other, between A.D. 200 and 800, the Temple of the Moon is the largest of a number of platform mounds that punctuate

the parched landscape. Today, most can easily pass for natural hills, having been rendered shapeless by torrential rains wrought by El Niño. The vast settlements that embraced them have since been blanketed by desert sands.

Rendered in six registers, the new-found frieze, which is 75 meters long and 22 meters high, marks the east end of a large plaza within the temple complex. Its lower two registers continue around the plaza. Two smaller relief panels grace the façade of a small building abutting the frieze within the plaza.

Although the Temple of the Moon and the nearby Temple of the Sun have been under nearly constant excavation since the 1970s, archaeologists have only recently reached the site's most ancient layers in an effort to stabilize the building and elucidate its construction history. Current conservation work at the site is being underwritten in part by WMF through its Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve Our Heritage. Until this discovery, the only other known example of the sacrifice ceremony not rendered on a portable object was that of a small painted mural found at the Moche site of Pañamarca in the Nepeña Valley. ■



THE NEW-FOUND FRIEZE, WHICH IS 75 METERS LONG AND 22 METERS HIGH, GRACES A WALL MARKING THE EAST END OF A LARGE PLAZA WITHIN THE TEMPLE OF THE MOON COMPLEX. TWO SMALLER CARVED PANELS, INSET, WERE FOUND ON A BUILDING THAT ABUTS THE FRIEZE WITHIN THE PLAZA.





GOD OF THE MOUNTAINS

ALSO KNOWN AS THE EXECUTIONER, HE CARRIES A DECAPITATED HUMAN HEAD IN ONE HAND, A KNIFE IN THE OTHER.



SERPENT

ASSOCIATED WITH WATER AND FERTILITY, THE SERPENT IS OFTEN USED IN MOCHE ART TO DEPICT RIVERS.



MYTHICAL BEAST

HALF FELINE AND HALF LIZARD, THIS DOUBLE-HEADED CREATURE ALSO HOLDS A DECAPITATED HEAD.



TWIN MARINER

IN MOCHE MYTHOLOGY THIS FIGURE REPRESENTS BOTH FISHERMEN AND SEAL HUNTERS.



DECAPITATING SPIDER

WITH A HUMAN HEAD IN ONE HAND AND A KNIFE IN THE OTHER, THE SPIDER DENOTES THE CEREMONIAL FUNCTION OF THE TEMPLE.



OFFERER

A ROW OF DANCERS HOLDING HANDS GRACES A LOWER REGISTER THAT ENCIRCLES THE ENTIRE PLAZA.



WARRIOR

VICTORIOUS WARRIORS BRANDISHING CLUBS AND SHIELDS ADORN THE LOWER-MOST REGISTER, WHICH ALSO ENCIRCLES THE PLAZA.