

Wari Trophy Heads from the Ancient Peruvian Andes

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Human trophy heads are well documented in the ancient Andes of South America, yet they remain an enigma in terms of determining how they were obtained and from whom. To begin to address these questions, an examination of morbidity patterns is essential, as this will serve to create a more nuanced picture of the individuals who were selected to be transformed into trophy heads. From this, we can begin to address longstanding debates regarding “trophy head as ancestor” versus “trophy head as enemy,” recognizing that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Identifying a trophy head is easily accomplished by referencing Verano’s (1995) clear definition for those associated with the Nasca polity (AD 1 – 600) of south-central Peru. In short, trophy heads are decapitated heads (or skulls) with a hole drilled through the frontal bone, used as a conduit for a carrying cord; they also have an enlarged foramen magnum to facilitate the extraction of the brain (Verano 1995). The ubiquity of Nasca trophy heads has been demonstrated by researchers working in the area (Browne, Silverman, and García 1993, 1991, Verano 1995, Williams, Forgey, and Klarich 2001), and until recently the Nasca trophy heads were the only ones recovered in great numbers. Recent excavations at the archaeological site of Conchopata by William Isbell and Anita Cook have shown for the first time that trophy heads are also associated with the Wari empire (AD 550 – 1000) from the central, highland Andes of Peru. This paper presents the results of the analysis of those trophy heads.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Wari empire was an expansive polity that spread from its capital area in the modern city of Ayacucho, Peru located in the central highland Andes. This empire incorporated diverse populations from highland, valley, and coastal regions of the Peruvian Andes, but it is unclear how this was achieved. Some scholars have suggested that Wari influence spread through religious or ideological means, while others have stressed the role of militarism. The role of trophy heads in the Wari empire could have been affiliated with both strategies: the trophy heads could represent ancestral beings who constituted part of the greater Wari ideological, ritual system or they could derive from enemies whose heads were obtained in raids. In either case, the Wari trophy heads appear to have been used in rituals, as they were all found in ritual structures at Conchopata; no trophy heads have yet been recovered from the mortuary or domestic sectors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Thirty-one trophy heads were recovered from two ritual structures at the Wari site of Conchopata; 10 trophy heads were excavated from a D-shaped room and 21 were recovered from a circular room. Those from the D-shaped room were all commingled and associated with smashed ceramics and llama bones, while those from the circular

room were dispersed into 21 discrete piles and were not in direct association with ceramics (Figure 1).

Age categories were based on cranial suture closure, dental eruption, and dental wear, and sex estimation was based on cranial morphology (no pelvic bones were present). All crania were examined to document how they were modified (i.e., location of holes, cutmarks). Well preserved crania were observed for trauma, cribra orbitalia, porotic hyperostosis, and dental infections. However, because all trophy heads were burned and smashed and most were incomplete, some observations were not possible.

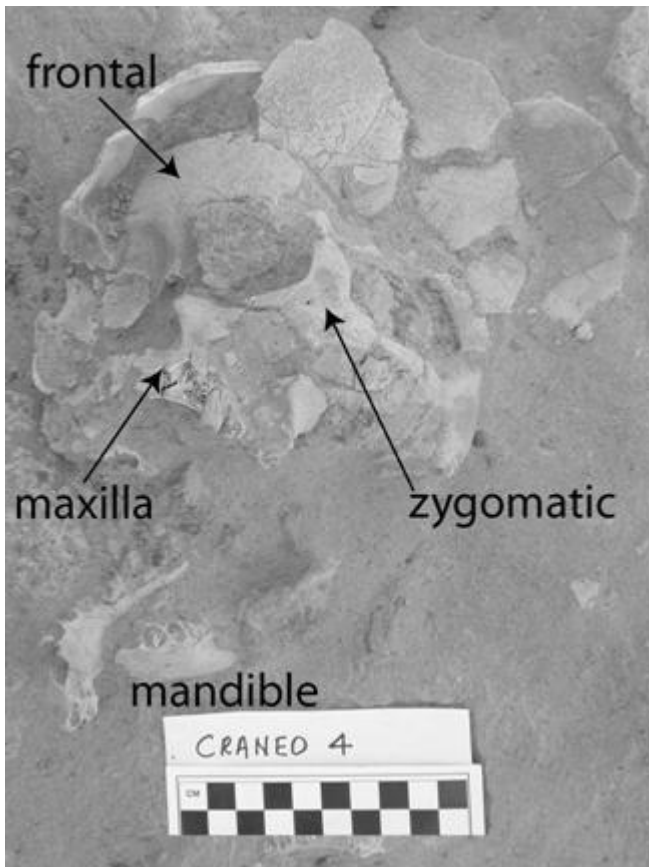


Figure 1. In situ trophy head from the floor of the circular ritual space. Photo by William Isbell (2001), labeled by this author.

RESULTS

Age and Sex of Conchopata Trophy Heads

Conchopata trophy heads generally derive from men over the age of 35 years, but young adults and children are also present in lower numbers. Twenty-four out of 31 trophy heads are from adults (77%); among these 24 adults, 13 are middle-aged to old ($13/24=54.2\%$), nine are young adults ($9/24=37.5\%$), and two are adults that could not be specifically aged $2/24=(8.3\%)$. The other 23 percent of the trophy head sample are children (7 out of 31). Six of the seven children are between the ages of three to six years; the age of the seventh child was indeterminable.

Among the 24 adult trophy heads, 17 could be assigned a sex: 10 are males, four are probable males, and three are probable females. Given that prepubescent individuals do not express sexually dimorphic skeletal traits, sex could not be assigned to the seven child trophy heads. The age and sex profiles signal a preference for older male individuals for trophy head modification; however, young children were apparently targeted as well.

The Wari and Nasca trophy head samples show similar sex profiles, suggesting parallels in gender criteria for those deemed appropriate for head taking. In contrast, age distributions are distinct between the two groups: among the Nasca trophy heads, only 7% are from juveniles (N=118), while nearly a quarter of the Wari trophy heads are from children (Tung 2003).

Modification of the Wari Trophy Heads

The Wari trophy heads are modified differently than those from Nasca, exhibiting a perforation at bregma, rather than on the frontal bone (Tung 2003). Seventeen out of 19 trophy heads (89.55%) display one hole at or within two centimeters of bregma (Figure 2). Among the other two, one exhibits a perforation on the left mid-parietal slightly lateral to the sagittal suture, and the second shows two perforations on the superior part of the frontal bone. The shape and smooth surface of all but one hole are the same, suggesting that a drilling tool was used to uniformly shape the perforation at bregma. Wari trophy heads were also drilled with smaller holes on the occipital bone; among the six individuals with complete occipital bones present, 83% displayed at least one hole (Tung 2003). Finally, of the 16 mandibles with at least one side of the ramus present, four (25%) exhibit a perforation on the ramus.

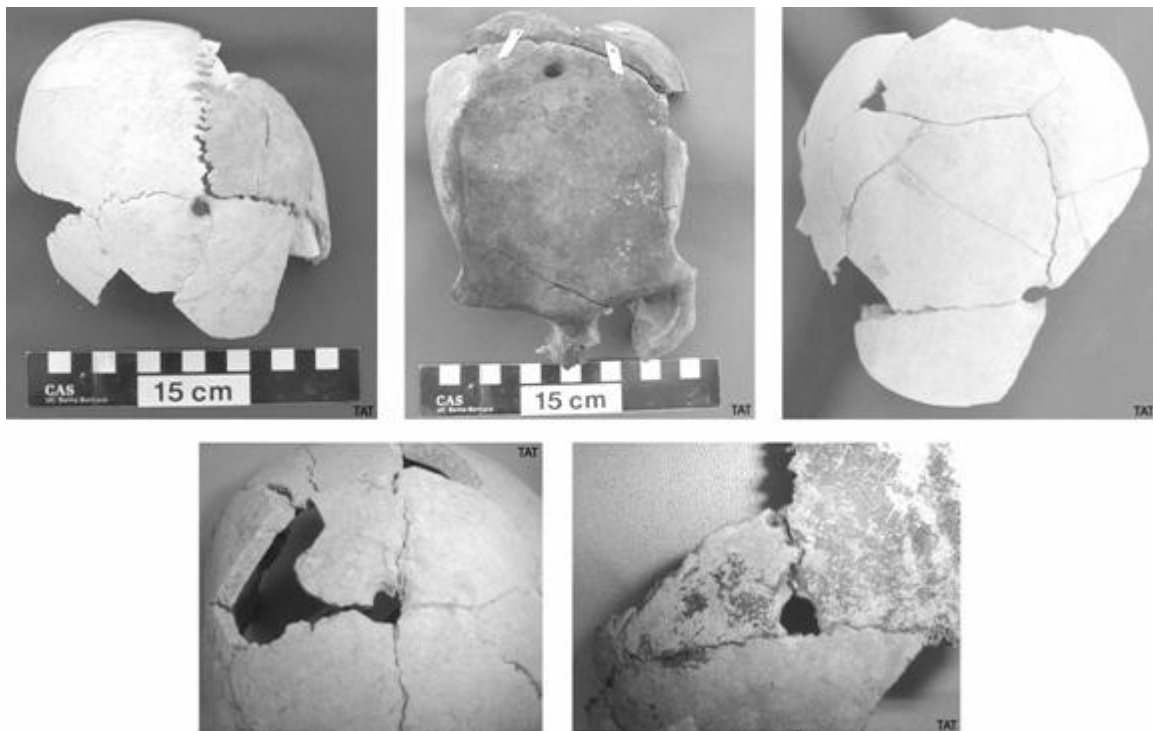


Figure 2. Five Conchopata trophy heads with perforations at bregma.

Other modifications to the trophy heads included the intentional removal of soft tissue. Nearly half of the 24 mandibles exhibit peri-mortem cutmarks on the posterior border of the ramus, indicating that skin and muscle were removed to disarticulate the mandible from the cranium (Figure 3). Also, one zygomatic bone fragment exhibits cut marks on its inferior edge, suggesting that facial tissue was flayed from the face. Together, these data suggest that trophy heads did not decay on their own, but were modified while the heads were still fresh.



Figure 3. Cutmarks on the posterior edge of the right ramus of a mandible from a Conchopata trophy head.

Trauma Among the Wari Trophy Heads

One-third of observable Wari trophy heads exhibit healed cranial wounds (6/18 = 33%). Among the sexes, five out of 10 male trophy heads (50%) and none of the three probable female trophy heads show pre-mortem trauma, and one out of five unsexed trophy heads exhibit a healed head injury (20%). Child trophy heads were too poorly preserved to make these observations. Notably, the trophy head trauma rate of 33% is not statistically significantly different from the 26 percent trauma rate among the population buried in the mortuary sector at Conchopata (Fisher's exact, $p=0.417$; $N=45$). That is, the trophy head victims are indistinguishable from the individuals buried in the Conchopata tombs in terms of cranial trauma rates. If only male trophy heads are considered, slightly more show cranial trauma relative to their male counterparts in the regular burial sample, but the difference is not significantly different (Fisher's exact, $p=0.278$; $N=18$).

The kind and count of head wounds among the trophy heads suggest that they were (previously) in non-lethal conflicts of singular occurrence. That is, five out of the six individuals with head injuries show healed wounds, indicating that most did not

receive lethal blows during earlier conflicts. Among the six wounded trophy heads, five exhibit only one wound, suggesting they were not in repeated physical fights that resulted in cranial depression fractures. The sixth person shows two wounds, but both are well-healed, so it is unknown if they were received in one or two separate incidents.

Among the seven discrete head traumas (five wounds on five adults and two wounds on one adult equals seven wounds), three are on the frontal bone ($3/7 = 43\%$) and four are on the posterior (parietal bosses) ($4/7 = 57\%$). Among the six well-preserved occipital bones, none display any wounds. Thus, the wounds are concentrated on the parietal bosses and frontal bone, which suggests that these wounds were not randomly incurred; instead, those portions of the head may have been intentionally targeted. The anterior trauma likely resulted from face-to-face conflict, while the posterior wounds may have been received in other contexts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The majority of Conchopata trophy heads are males, and older males are more common than young males. However, children constitute nearly a quarter of the sample, and there are three possible females in the collection. Based on the Conchopata sample, it appears that the Wari selected men, children, and possibly women for transformation into trophy heads, and nearly all of them were modified in the same way. Cutmarks indicate that soft tissue was intentionally carved from the bone, particularly to separate the mandible and cranium. Perforations were drilled primarily on three parts of the skull: bregma, the nuchal crest, and the ramus. In contrast, Nasca trophy heads exhibit only one hole on the center of the frontal bone. To this author's knowledge, there are no Nasca trophy heads with perforations at bregma, the nuchal crest, and ramus, indicating that Wari methods of trophy head modification were distinct from those of the earlier Nasca society. Thus, this author suggests that drilled holes on these skull locations are diagnostic characteristics of Wari trophy heads.

Pre-mortem cranial trauma was present on one-third of the trophy head sample, yet this frequency was indistinguishable from the general mortuary population. This suggests that trophy head victims were not engaged in more violent conflicts than any other individuals from the community; thus, it appears that the adult trophy heads were not derived from a warrior class, at least not exclusively. However, while they may not represent warriors per se, they may represent vanquished enemies taken from other communities during raids, similar to what Silverman and Proulx (2002:233) note regarding the source of Nasca trophy heads. The nature of these raids, however, remains to be elucidated.

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