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Sexuality: ancient Andean South America

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Our knowledge of prehistoric sexual practices and perspectives on sexuality in Andean South America is based on several lines of evidence: human skeletal remains, representational imagery, the organization of space, and ethnohistoric documents. These materials provide information on how ancient Andean people thought about sex acts and sexual relationships among men, women, animals, deities, and the dead.

Los Amantes de Sumpa (The Lovers of Sumpa), Ecuador, are among the earliest human remains from the region that provide insight into sexuality. Los Amantes were discovered in a double burial, in a cemetery on the Santa Elena Peninsula associated with the Vegas culture (6000–4600 B.C.E.). The burial contained a young man and woman, each one aged between 20 and 25 years. Their position indicates that they were embracing at the time of death or their bodies were arranged in an embrace by those who buried them. Large stones were placed directly atop the pelvises of both the man and the woman, possibly to indicate that they had engaged in a transgressive sexual act. Alternatively, the stones may have been part of a funerary ritual meant to protect the living or the dead.

The positions of the bodies indicate that Vegas people recognized intimate relationships—whether transgressive or not—and marked them in death through double burial and body arrangement. The majority of the individuals in the Santa Elena cemetery were buried alone, suggesting that Los Amantes received unusual funerary treatment due to who they were, what they did, or how they died.

Figurine traditions of Ecuador

A concern with the human form and secondary sexual characteristics is evident in the Formative figurine traditions of Ecuador. The Valdivia

culture (3000–1500 B.C.E.) is associated with stone and clay “venus” figurines and the emergence of settled village life. While male and unsexed individuals were represented, female figurines with clearly marked breasts, pubic areas, and elaborate “hooded” hair styles dominate (see Figure 1). The figurines display stylistic variability throughout the Valdivia sequence, suggesting that their functions changed through time; many appear to have been intentionally broken before discard. Valdivia figurines have been interpreted as fertility objects; other possibilities include use as amulets, or in curing, shamanic, or life-crisis rituals related to menarche or pregnancy. Stothert (2003:399) has suggested that Valdivia female figurines were metaphors “for cosmic creation and regeneration.”

Though anthropomorphic figurines continued to be made during the succeeding Middle and Late Formative phases—Machalilla (1500–800 B.C.E.) and Chorerra (1300–500 B.C.E.), respectively—emphasis on biological sex in these figurines declined in favor of representations of male–female complementarity and emerging markers of elite status and role.

The Regional Development period in Ecuador is marked by the appearance of distinctive ceramic and figurine traditions and a concern with hierarchy. Markers of gender, status, and role are evident in Tolita-phase figurines (600 B.C.E.–400 C.E.) from Esmeraldas province, Ecuador, where women and men are shown engaged in various activities and occupations.

Free-standing figurines of both men and women are a hallmark of the Jama-Coaque culture (300 B.C.E.–1450 C.E.) of the Manabí region. Figures wear elaborate appliquéd headdresses and ornaments, in contrast to the simpler Formative styles. Diverse and realistic, Jama-Coaque figurines represent a range of roles, reinforcing associations between gender and specific activities or occupations. The pubic areas on female figurines are covered by skirts, though breasts are often bared.

In the Peruvian Andes stonework, ceramic vessels, and textiles rather than figurines were the primary media used to communicate ideas about



Figure 1 Ceramic Valdivia figurine from Ecuador, ca. 2100 B.C.E. The body of the figurine simultaneously represents female genitalia, with the legs as vulva, the navel as clitoris, and the torso as pubis. The head of the figurine doubles as the head of a penis.

Source: © 2014. Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

sex and gender. Representational imagery suggests that human and animal sexual relations were an enduring artistic concern from as early as 500 B.C.E. Distinctions between human and animal blur, in imagery that unites attributes such as a fanged feline mouth and clawed feet with the human body. Hybrid sexual relations, human intercourse, and genitalia often appear in explicit detail on the ceramics of Salinar, Vicús, and Moche on the north coast and Paracas and Nasca on the south coast. Many of these traditions were influenced by the Chavín Horizon style.

Chavín de Huántar and the vagina dentata motif (900–400 B.C.E.)

Complementarity and hybridity are two Andean themes that received early elaboration in the Peruvian highlands at the site of Chavín de Huántar. The site is known for its extraordinary stonework and for its widespread iconographic influence.

The Black and White Portal, an architectural feature at Chavín, embodies the dualism present

in so much of Andean imagery. Hybrid creatures are sculpted on either side of the portal: on the north side is a winged anthropomorph with a fanged mouth, clawed feet, and raptor's beak; on the south side is its female counterpart, featuring a "toothed vagina" (*vagina dentata*). Although explicit sexual imagery has not been identified at Chavín, the art and architecture of the site emphasize balance, dualism, and the merging of human and animal features.

Chavín influenced regional artistic styles on the coast, which translated the fanged mouth into a generative orifice, referencing agricultural and human reproduction. The values of dualism and male–female complementarity expressed at Chavín were adopted and transformed by Recuay, Paracas, and Nasca people.

Explicit depictions of genitalia, masturbation of the penis, and heterosexual intercourse appear in ceramics of Vicús (100 B.C.E.–600 C.E.) in the Piura Valley; Salinar (200 B.C.E.–100 C.E.) in the Virú and Chicama coastal valleys; and Gallinzo (200 B.C.E.–300 C.E.) in the Virú Valley. Prominent or disproportionately large phalli first appear in these ceramic traditions; this motif is of enduring popularity on the Peruvian coast.

Regional diversity in sexual imagery

Recuay (100 B.C.E.–700 C.E.)

Evidence for sexuality from the Recuay culture of the Callejón de Huaylas of the central Andean highlands exists in the form of ceramic vessels depicting heterosexual sex and monolithic stonework that features anthropomorphs with explicit genitalia.

Abstract and stylized, ceramic vessels depict two types of three-dimensional scenes: a man and woman copulating face to face, male in a superior position, often amid onlookers; and a seated couple, their torsos and lower legs forming the ceramic body. Genitalia are not shown in either type of scene. Clothing and headdresses mark elite status and distinguish the genders. The vessels representing seated copulation tend to have two spouts: one to receive liquid, one to pour. This complementarity in function may reference the exchange of sexual fluids. Such vessels were likely used for

chicha, a frothy maize-based beer. Recuay people may have conceived of sexual reproduction and the exchange of semen as analogous to the production of *chicha*. The coastal Moche culture makes such visual puns explicit through ceramic vessels with modeled penises that function as spouts.

Information about Recuay sexuality is also conveyed by monoliths with low-relief images of nude, forward-facing anthropomorphs. The sculptures are minimalist, marking only essential elements, which include biological sex organs: penis and testicles, or a notched pubis. Lau (2011) has argued that the sculptures, which are consistently located near funerary monuments, represent the generative potential and influence of male or female ancestors or lineage heads. Such an interpretation suggests that the Recuay recognized ambilineal or bilateral descent.

The iconography of intercourse on Recuay ceramics emphasizes dualism and complementarity in reproductive and productive acts. In contrast, biological sex and descent are marked by stone monoliths; they constitute evidence that, in some lineages, maternal descent was as valued and significant as paternal.

Paracas (900 B.C.E.–400 C.E.)

The Paracas culture of the South Coast of Peru is known primarily through ceramics and textiles from funerary contexts. Painted Carhua (Karwa) textiles demonstrate an iconographic debt to Chavín, particularly in depictions of the “staff god,” an anthropomorphic male figure with fanged mouth and clawed feet. The staff god is shown wearing a belt or waistband; a triangular projection over the pelvis suggests a penis. The (male) fanged mouth may represent an inversion of the female vagina dentata, or the structural equivalence of the two motifs. Paracas iconography highlights the mouth as a supernatural source or entry point. As a generative and penetrable orifice, the Paracas mouth may be analogous to the Moche phallus.

Nasca (100 B.C.E.–650 C.E.)

Nasca representations of men and women emphasize biological sex and gender roles. When women appear in Nasca art (300 C.E.), they are

often shown in childbirth. Vaginal intercourse is also modeled in ceramics; some vessels are reminiscent of Recuay seated couples. A concern with female genitalia is evident in both painted ceramics and modeled vessels, which depict realistically pubic hair, the vulva, the vaginal slit, and the clitoral hood. On some female figurines the pubis is represented as a supernatural mouth, recalling the vagina dentata motif found in Carhua textiles and in Chavín sculpture.

Nasca imagery emphasizes and elaborates female genitalia to a greater extent than any other Andean artistic tradition. When considered in tandem with representations of vaginal intercourse, childbirth, plants, and insemination, Proulx’s (2006) interpretation of Nasca iconography as fertility-oriented is convincing.

Moche (100–800 C.E.)

Moche “sex pots,” with their explicit representations of genitalia and sexual acts involving humans, animals, skeletons, and deities, are among the most famous examples of prehistoric sexual imagery in the world. Pottery features disproportionately large and erect phalli, masturbation, and oral and anal sex. Human men and women copulate with each other and with hybrid supernatural figures and skeletons. Faces are generally expressionless. The penis, the vagina, and the anus are the focus of Moche attention; nipples and breasts do not appear to be of erogenous concern.

Moche sexual imagery consistently blurs boundaries between bodies and worlds. Penetration of the mouth and anus is highlighted, as is sexual congress between the living and the dead and between humans and supernatural male figures. Males are generally shown above or atop, in sex acts; they often make gestures with their hands and grip or hold the heads of women performing fellatio. The bodies of human women are depicted as anal recipients of the male phallus or of masturbating erect phalli. Penetration of the vagina is rarely (if ever) shown (Gero 2004). When the vagina is explicitly represented, its function as an opening or receptacle for fluid is highlighted. Moche iconographic conventions present women’s bodies as passive and malleable; however, Bourget (2006) suggests that such interpretations belie women’s complex roles in cycles

of birth, death, and sacrifice. Children are often present, but not participants, in scenes of male–female intercourse.

Agricultural fertility and renewal are standard interpretations of Moche iconography; numerous scenes of anal intercourse therefore present a conundrum. Bergh (1993) has related anal sex to death and decay. Bourget (2006) has suggested that it represents “inverted fertility,” a reversal of reproductive vaginal sex. The common motif of skeletons with erect phalli provides support for this thesis, implying that generative potential is immanent, even in death.

Scenes of sex involving animals feature toads, rodents, llamas, bats, and canids. These animals copulate with conspecifics and occasionally with human women. Such scenes are not meant to realistically represent bestiality. Rather they reference numinous acts of intercourse with mythical human–animal hybrids and the transformative potential of sexual congress. The Moche employed zoomorphism and anthropomorphism extensively, representing, for example, a deer with a human penis and testicles, seated and cross-legged—an analog for naked male prisoners in the same pose. Some vessels show women on all fours or crouching during anal sex, blurring distinctions between humanity and animality.

Arboleda (1981), Horswell (2005:119–123), and Mathieu (2003:35) have all argued that same-sex anal intercourse is depicted on Moche vessels; if so, such vessels are greatly outnumbered by those showing heterosexual anal sex. Horswell has also suggested that a third gender is represented in some scenes.

A concern with female youth and nubility is evident in patterns of sacrifice from the Moche period. Many high-status tombs contain bodies of young women who were strangled. Such interments provide a counterpoint to the more numerous and bloody sacrificial deaths of young, warrior-age males. The supernatural efficacy of young women may have been credited to their reproductive potential, whereas that of young men resided in blood, combat, and violent death.

Moche imagery and sacrificial ritual, though incompletely understood, are concerned with dualism and conceptual juxtapositions. The imagery of sex/death, male/female, and

human/animal blurs the line between these ontological categories and inverts them. Male sexual potency, as expressed in disproportionately large and erect phalli, was highly valued, perhaps in part due to its association with warfare, blood sacrifice, and violent death.

The Moche were succeeded by the Chimú Empire (1000–1476), with its distinctive blackware vessels. Male–female human intercourse is depicted, but it is generally restricted to vaginal penetration. Fellatio, anal intercourse, and sex with supernatural creatures, animals, and skeletons are rare or nonexistent. Chimú artists employed a much more limited repertoire of sexual imagery than their Moche counterparts. One possible explanation for this change is a shift in religious emphasis, anal intercourse with supernatural creatures no longer playing a significant role in ritual and belief.

Incas (1438–1572)

Male–female dualism, first evident in Formative Period Ecuador (Stohtert 2003), was a core value expressed in Inca cosmology and ethnohistoric documents (Dean 2001). The unity of male and female and the balance between them were embodied in royal incest between the Inca emperor and his sister-wife; their union had antecedents in Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, the mythical brother–sister pair who founded the Inca line and first settled in Cuzco. Prohibited for the population at large, incest as practiced by the Inca ruler signaled divinity and exceptionality. The incestuous union of brother and sister marked their exemption from social norms and embodied the unification of empire (Cummins 2002) and the structure of the Inca cosmos.

The Inca Empire depended upon tribute, both agricultural and human. Boys and girls were sent to the Inca ruler each year; some were sacrificed as *capa cochas*, offerings to mountain gods. The most attractive and skilled girls became *acllas*, chosen women. Those dedicated to the sun god were virgins who engaged in ritual service and weaving. Other *acllas* were given as wives in order to solidify alliances. The uses of young women under Inca rule—as sacrificial offerings, as virginal servants to the sun, and as marriage prizes—suggest an enduring concern

with controlling female (re)productive labor. Inca elites harnessed nubility, fertility, and weaving skills—all explicitly female-gendered—in the service of empire.

In conclusion, stonework and ceramics of the Andean region represent a rich corpus of data on prehistoric sexuality. In Ecuador figurine traditions dominated, whereas in Peru ceramic vessels received greater elaboration. Additional evidence is provided by Chavín textiles, Recuay stone sculptures, burials, sacrifices, and ethnohistorical documents. While the Ecuadorian figurine traditions are most highly illustrative of gender roles, Peruvian ceramic traditions are more informative on sexuality, with their diverse and explicit depictions of oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse. Iconography and skeletal remains demonstrate the culturally and historically contingent nature of gender and sexuality in the Andes. Prehistoric gender roles, sexual practices, and perceptions of male and female bodies shifted through time so as to meet changing sociopolitical, ideological, and imperial demands.

SEE ALSO: Erotic Art; Figurines: Mesoamerica; Moche Sex Pots; Vagina Dentata

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