Conserving and interpreting two bird pendants from the mid-Chincha Valley, Peru

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Context

This poster investigates the material composition and cultural significance of two bird pendants from the mid-Chincha Valley, Peru; one recovered from a platform mound dating to the Late-Paracas Period (400100 B.C.) and the other from a semi-subterranean, collective tomb, or chullpa, likely dating to the Late Intermediate Period (A.D. 10003470). Over the past three seasons, our team, led by Dr. Charles Stansfield and Dr. Henry Tantaleán, has been excavating a platform mound known as Cerro del Gentil (PV05764) and surveying the mid-Chincha Valley. Our excavations reveal Cerro del Gentil to be a three-level/Paracas-platform mound with 2 sunken courts containing mummy bundles and offerings of maize, baskets, and painted pottery. Our survey identified a dense, late-prehispanic mortuary landscape featuring over 500 chullpas in the mid-Chincha Valley. These chullpas cluster into cemeteries and frequently feature multiple burials, fieldstone masonry, and small openings that facilitated reuse.

Materials and method

Object from Cerro del Gentil

Though it appears at first glance to be the head of a real bird, the artifact is actually made of unfired clay. The clay was modeled in high relief to resemble a bird’s head. Orange and green feathers appear to have been inserted into the clay while it was still wet. Once the clay dried, the feather tips were secured in place. The right eye is very visible, while the left eye is only slightly visible. The eyes were made using a black beam and surrounding it with thin cord. Slight incisions in the clay suggest a slightly hooked beak.

The back of the pendant is covered in a layer of unspun fiber that was pressed into the wet clay. Microscopy confirmed that the unspun fiber is cotton, as is the cord, detailed below. Fragments of leaves sit on top of the cotton and clay layers; these were also likely pressed into the cotton and clay when wet. The leaves are likely coca (Erythroxylum coca).

A cord is attached to both sides of the bird’s head. It is 2-spun and Spunny; one of the strands is a neutral color and the other a light brown. The cord is knotted in four places near the top. Three of the short pieces of cord are visible on the top of the back of the pendant; it is possible that the object was originally stitched to something or the cord was originally attached at those locations.

Extremely dry burial conditions have resulted in excellent preservation of the colors of the feathers. Due to the fragile nature of unfired clay, however, the pendant is fragile. The feathers are no longer well attached and thus prone to fragmenting off of the pendant. Similarly, the leaves on the back of the pendant are brittle and prone to flaking.

Object from UC-OOB

The object found in UC-OOB Tomb 1 appears to be another bird pendant, although more difficult to interpret. It is completely different in materials and construction from the Cerro del Gentil artifact. This object is made of the main body of a bird that has been skinned. The feathers range from light peach to light gray, with some light brown feathers also present. All of the feathers are contour feathers. Neither the head nor the wings of the bird are present. No bones were found within. It is likely, then, that once skinned, the stiff flimsy body was folded gently to form its oval shape.

A cord threaded through the feathers helped to maintain this shape. The cord is a light brown color, 2spun and Spiky. Overhand knots join the two strands of cord at the middle and at the end.

Interpretation

Object from Cerro del Gentil

This elaborately crafted bird pendant appears to be a prestige body adornment that may have been placed around a mummy bundle and/or worn by a ceramic figurine from Cerro del Gentil. The discovery of mummy bundles, offerings, and multiple sunken courts suggest that significant ceremonial activities took place at the site. In reference to Paracas mummy bundles, Ann Paul (1990, p. 4245) finds that nonlocal and local feathered artifacts were positioned either close to the body or in the peridental textile layer. Whether the pendant’s vibrant, colorful feathers and unfired clay bird head are derived from local or nonlocal birds is unclear.

Although the pendant was not found hanging around a body or material object, its long, spun fiber necklace cord suggests that the pendant adorned something on someone at some point during its use life, perhaps as part of ritual attire. Based on the available archaeological evidence, we hypothesize that 1) the pendant is a non-local object obtained through long-distance exchange and 2) it was displayed during special events at Cerro del Gentil.

Object from UC-OOB

This bird pendant is likely an offering to the deceased of UC-OOB Tomb 1, which is a rectangular, semi-subterranean, collective tomb. The site contains at least 115 individuals, multiple mummy bundles, and several grave goods including a ground bowl with maize and a Spondylus bead. We found evidence of postmortem body manipulation including multiple human bones with red pigment, cut marks, and vertebrae placed on red posts. The tomb also exhibits an opening that would have permitted reaccess, allowing groups to make additional offerings and bury more deceased individuals. Given this ritual charged, Late Intermediate Period context, we suggest that this bird pendant was deposited as an offering to the deceased during a mortuary ritual.

Conclusions

Mortuary rituals and ceremonial activities are cross-cultural social processes that comprise a diversity of practices, varying across time, space, and social organization. One such practice is the modification of animal remains into adornments. We employed archaeological data analysis approaches to study how two bird pendants from the mid-Chincha Valley were made and develop hypotheses for how these artifacts were used in their respective cultural contexts. Both pendants show care and deliberation in their construction, from the patient hand-modeling of the unfired clay into a bird’s head to the precise skimming of the actual bird. Our archaeological data to date suggests these artifacts played critical roles in the ceremonial activities and mortuary rituals associated with Cerro del Gentil and UC-OOB Tomb 1.

Future directions

To further test our hypotheses, we are planning to identify the feathers on both feathered artifacts and determine whether they are sourced from local or nonlocal birds. An x-ray analysis of the UC-OOB artifact would help with understanding its structure, and X-ray diffraction may be useful in interpreting the red pigment present.

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