

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

Colleen O'Shea,ⁱ Jacob Bongers,ⁱⁱ and Henry Tantaleánⁱⁱ

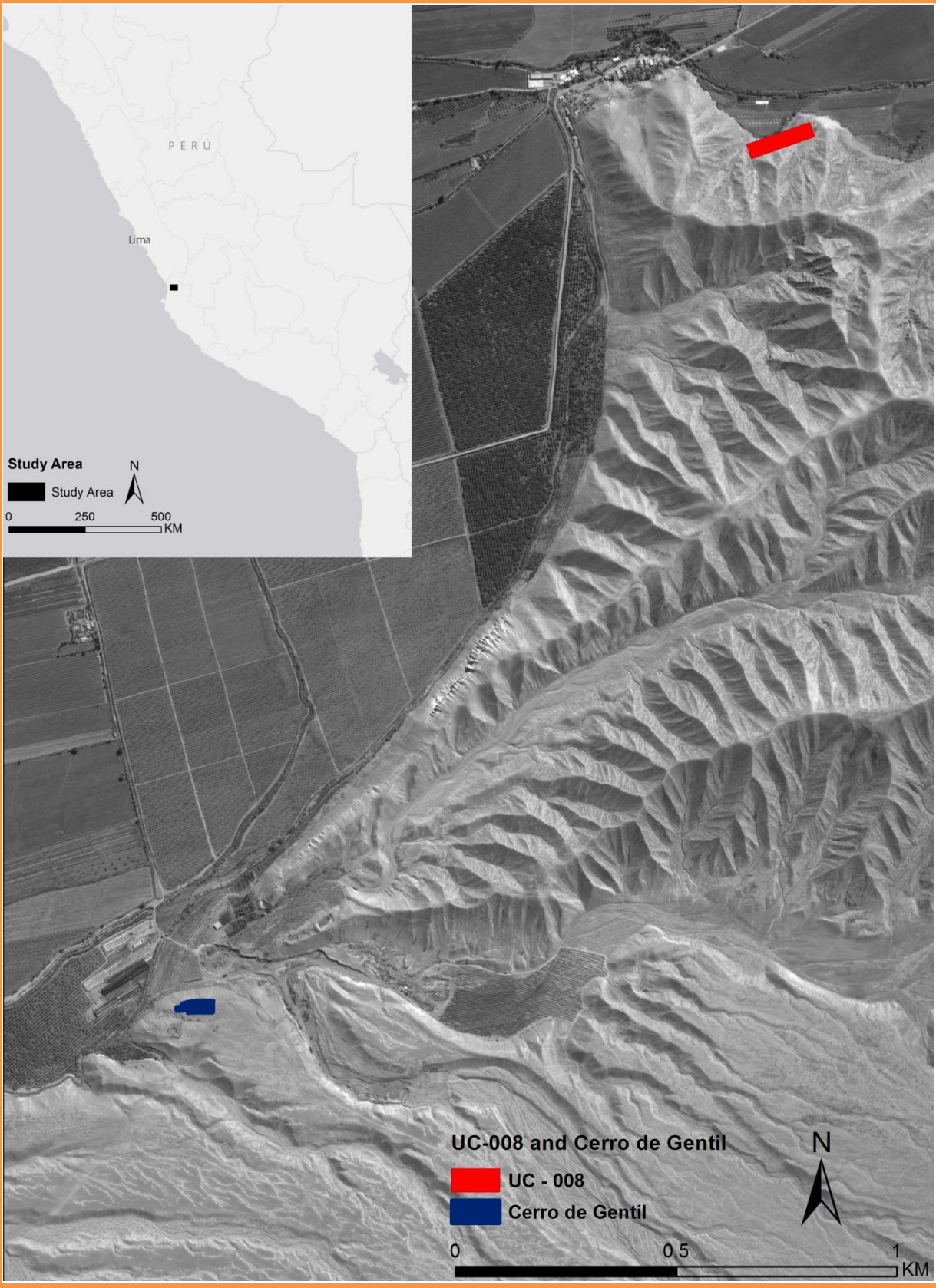
ⁱ SUNY Buffalo State, ⁱⁱ Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles

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 (400-100 B.C.) and the other from a semi-subterranean, collective tomb, or *chullpa*, likely dating to the Late Intermediate Period (A.D. 1000-1476). Over the past three seasons, our team, led by Dr. Charles Stanish and Dr. Henry Tantaleán, has been excavating a platform mound known as Cerro del Gentil (PV57-64) and surveying the mid-Chincha Valley. Our excavations reveal Cerro del Gentil to be a three-tiered 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.



Cerro del Gentil site (l), artifact in situ (r)



Map of artifact locations



Site UC-008 with Tomb 1 indicated (l), artifact in situ (r)

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 bean and surrounding it with thin cord. Slight incisions in the clay suggest a slightly hooked beak.

Dimensions: 8 cm in diameter, 3.5 cm at highest point; with cord, 27 cm long.

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 Z-spun and S-plyed; 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 other 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 friable. 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-008

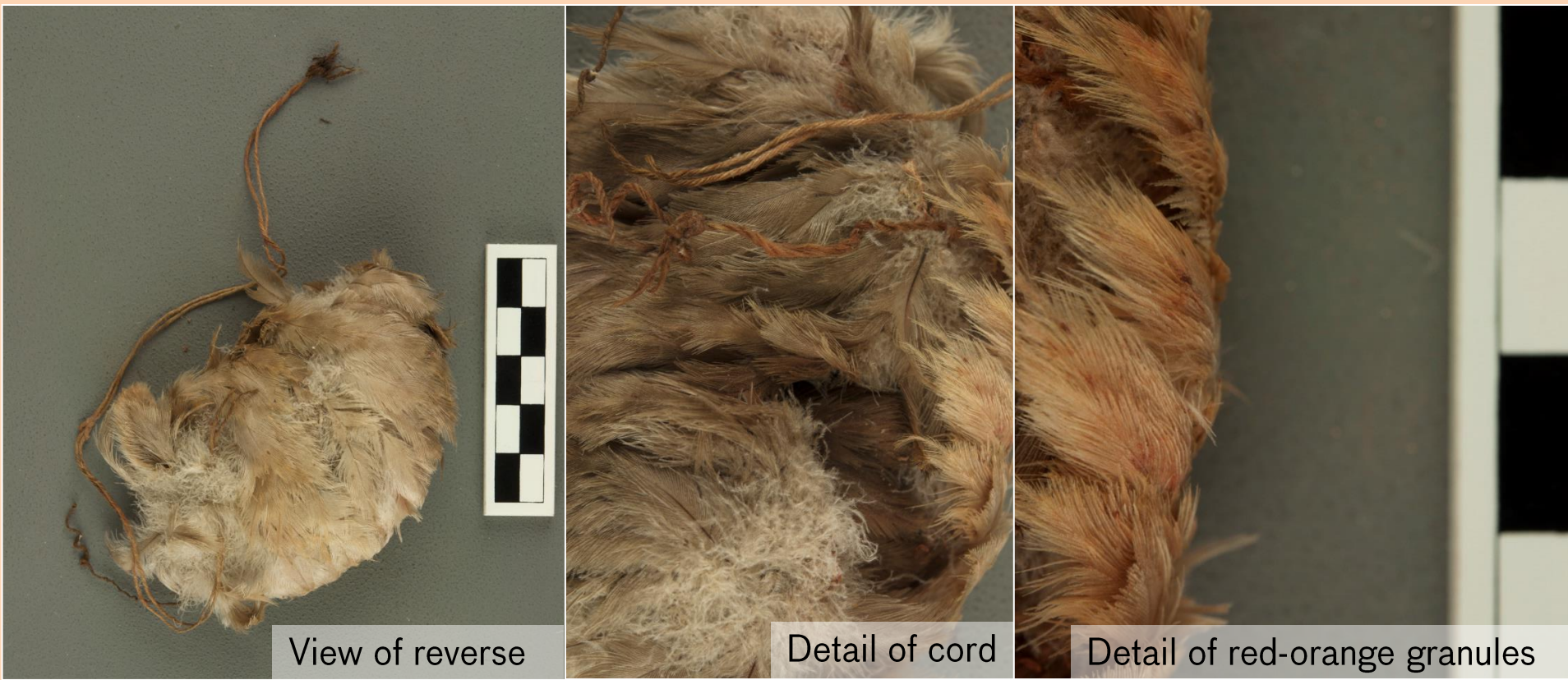


It is unknown whether this bird pendant also functioned as a container. There appears to be a slight hollow inside the object, accessed by lifting some of the feathers. A granular red-orange substance is present on some of the feathers near this opening. X-ray fluorescence performed on a sample of the granules taken from the feathers characterized the sample as mostly iron, corresponding with observations made with polarized light microscopy. It is unclear whether the pigment granules were applied to the feathers in a type of local *tapirage* (O'Neil p. 147), or whether the pigment granules were separately inserted into the hollow.

The object found in UC-008 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 still fleshy 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, Z-spun and S-plyed. Overhand knots join the two strands of cord at the middle and at the end.

Dimensions: 8.5 x 6 x 2.5 cm



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 ritual specialists during ceremonial events at 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. 42-43) finds that non-local and local feathered artifacts were positioned either close to the body or in the penultimate textile layer. Whether the pendant's vibrant, colorful feathers and unfired clay bird head are derived from local or non-local 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 or 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.



Detail of leaves on reverse

Object from UC-008

This bird pendant is likely an offering to the deceased of UC-008 Tomb 1, which is a rectangular, semi-subterranean, collective chullpa. This tomb contains at least 115 individuals, multiple mummy bundles, and several grave goods including a gourd bowl with maize and a *Spondylus* bead. We found evidence of post-mortem body manipulation including multiple human bones with red pigment, cut marks, and vertebrae placed on reed posts. The tomb also exhibits an opening that would have permitted re-access, allowing groups to make additional offerings and bury more deceased individuals. Given this ritually charged, Late Intermediate Period context, we suggest that this bird pendant was deposited as an offering to the deceased during a mortuary ritual.



UC-008 Tomb 1



Cranium with red pigment from UC-008 Tomb 1

The use of red pigment on human remains and this bird pendant suggests strong connections between this unknown bird and the Chincha belief system concerning the dead. The spun fiber cord suggests it was attached to a textile and/or designed to be a portable, personal adornment. We have yet to identify the feathers of this pendant, but we hypothesize that the pendant was crafted locally and offered to the deceased of UC-008 Tomb 1.

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 and materials 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 skinning 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-008 Tomb 1.

Future directions

To further our test our hypotheses, we are planning to identify the feathers on both feathered artifacts and determine whether they are sourced from local or non-local birds. An x-radiograph of the UC-008 artifact would help with understanding its structure, and X-ray diffraction may be useful in interpreting the red pigment present.

References:
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O'Neil, John P. (1994). "Featherwork," in *Costumes and Featherwork of the Lords of the Chimor: Textiles from Peru's North Coast*, ed. A.P. Rowe. Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum.

Acknowledgments

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