arts

MDPI

Article

Visual Nature: Multiperspectivity on Peru's South Coast

Carolyn Dean

History of Art and Visual Culture, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA; csdean@ucsc.edu

Abstract

Imagery produced by the Indigenous peoples of south-coastal Peru (100 BCE–700 CE) frequently paired plants, animals (human and otherwise), and what have been called mythical or supernatural entities in predator–prey relationships. The dyads suggest that the Nasca and their Paracas predecessors understood the biosphere as both the source and product of energy flow in which all entities functioned as both takers and givers. The perspectivist concept of multinaturalism reveals the ways south-coastal imagery visualizes commonality beyond domains; plants, animals, supernaturals, the living, and the dead all participated in the necessary give and take of life energy. Employing a holistic, ecosystemic perspective, artisans utilized visual analogy to emphasize this commonality across their different natures. Although predators and prey might appear antagonistic, ultimately, in cosmic terms, the pairings perform as complements, and so serve to remind viewers of their reciprocal obligations: takers must give, and givers must take. Yet, despite emphasizing equilibrium, takers dominated the south-coastal pictorial corpus. In the end, such imagery served the interests of high-status males who themselves took on powerful "taker" abilities, suggesting that they and their actions revved the cosmic engine to the benefit of all beings.

Keywords: complementary; indigenous ontologies; multinaturalism; Nasca; nature/culture as a cultural construct; other-than-human; perspectivism; predation; reciprocity; relationality

1. Introduction

For nearly a millennium, from at least the first century BCE to the eighth century CE, peoples now known as the Nasca inhabited south-coastal Peru, congregated into sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating agrarian communities where they confronted hyper-arid environmental challenges (Figure 1).[1] Across the region, and despite often violent clashes, skilled artisans produced a visually and thematically coherent corpus of colorful imagery that records their observations about the south-coastal ecosystem. One typical theme emphasizes duality through the pairings of plants, animals (here and henceforth understood to include *Homo sapiens*), and what have been called mythical or supernatural entities engaged in capture and consumption: birds feed on worms; caterpillars consume plants; culpeos (Andean "foxes") scavenge human corpses, and so on (Figures 2–4).[2]

Check for updates

Academic Editor: Claire Farago

Received: 24 February 2026
Revised: 2 May 2026
Accepted: 6 May 2026
Published: 27 May 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.



Figure 1. Map indicating the general locations of the Nasca and their Paracas predecessors on Peru's south coast.



Figure 2. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, double-spout bottle depicting two birds with worms, 100 BCE–500 CE, height 17.78 cm, Yale Peabody Museum YPM ANT.235172, photo by Renovation Move Crew, 2019.



Figure 3. Caterpillars feeding on a plant (bean? maize?), drawing after a bowl by an unknown Nasca ceramicist, 100 BCE–500 CE.[3].

Such dyadic imagery suggests two broad categories of being that, for now, will be glossed as predator and prey. Both terms are broadly construed such that fruits and vegetables are included under "prey" and human agriculturalists are characterized as "predators." The recognition of likeness between victories in combat and crop abundance has a long history in the Andes. It was clearly expressed by the Inka (1400–1532 CE) whose

songs of triumph (called *haylli*) celebrated successes both in battle and harvest.[4] Later discussion will question the extent to which the lexicon of predation best characterizes nuanced Indigenous perspectives and suggest that what appears to be a celebration of predation also insists on reciprocity between givers and takers, maintaining balance on a cosmic scale.



Figure 4. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, bowl depicting culpeos with a headless human cadaver, 100 BCE–500 CE, 8.3 × 16.5 cm, Art Institute of Chicago 1956.1162, S. B. Williams Fund and Edward E. Ayer Endowment in memory of Charles L. Hutchinson.

In addition to human beings, the most prominent natural (as opposed to supernatural or imaginary) pictorial predators are a wide variety of birds, as well as culpeos, orcas, and pampas cats.[5] Humans also number among frequently portrayed natural prey along with both finfish and shellfish, lizards, and various plants. A consideration of south-coastal dyadic imagery—with an emphasis on early Nasca visual culture, the beginnings of which overlaps with Paracas archaeological phases—suggests that the pairs did not identify rigid sets of either predators or prey.[6] Rather, both categories were flexible with animals and plants acting in both roles.

Significantly, some predator–prey pairings defy natural or common patterns of consumption, as when carnivorous felines and insectivorous toads are paired with edible flora (fruits or root or tuber crops; Figures 5 and 6).[7] Apparently, south-coastal visual culture was less concerned with identifying fixed, antagonistic binaries than in diagramming shifting relationalities in which all entities—plants, animals, and extra-naturals—participate. In so doing, dyadic imagery documents the vital circulation of vibrancy or life energy throughout the Andean biosphere.



Figure 5. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, double-spout bottle depicting two pampas cats with fruit motifs, 100 BCE–500 CE, height 18.42 cm, Yale Peabody Museum YPM ANT.235612. Photo by Renovation Move Crew, 2018.



Figure 6. Nasca, unknown ceramicist, single-spout-and-bridge bottle depicting a toad with fruit motifs, 300–500 CE, 16.83 × 13.34 × 12.7 cm, Dallas Museum of Art 1989.W.173, the Nora and John Wise Collection, bequest of Nora Wise. Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art.

2. Visual Analogy

A painted cotton textile fragment in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), stylistically dating to the Proto-Nasca period (*c*. 100 BCE–100 CE) in which Nasca overlaps with the earlier Paracas culture, employs imagery that implies an analogous relationship among prey (Figure 7). Finfish are visually likened to shellfish, seeds (beans, which are legume seeds), and human heads. These preyed-upon things are grouped in narrow columns placed next to wider columns that picture predation against these and other food sources. Seabirds, identifiable by their webbed feet and other adaptations to a marine environment, hold both shellfish and finfish in their beaks while others seek minuscule crustaceans or tiny edibles on sandy shores or in shallow waters. The wide columns also include Peruvian flying fish (*Exocoetus peruvianus*), finfish inhabiting the Humboldt Current along Peru's coast but which have long wing-like fins that make it possible for them to glide above the ocean's surface for considerable distances. Pictorially, their ability to "fly" is indicated by feathered wings—identical to those of the seabirds—extending from their piscine bodies. The imagery intimates that south-coastal peoples conceived of them as birds of the sea. Like some of the other "seabirds," flying fish are depicted searching out a variety of zooplankton from the seabed.

While it is not surprising to observe seabirds feeding on coastal resources, both in life and on the painted cloth, it is a striking sight to behold some of them gripping human heads by the hair. Although in the "real" world birds might well scavenge human remains, the hair-holding manner of display aligns these birds with both human and composite imaginary entities who are frequently depicted grasping disembodied human heads (often called trophy heads in the literature; Figures 8 and 9). In portraying the commensurability of consumables, the AMNH textile is consistent with other imagery in which "prey" are readily transposable. Disarticulated heads, for example, are visually analogous to germinating beans; both form borders with the heads' flowing hair likened to sprouting legumes (Browne et al. 1993, p. 277).

Nasca imagery also amalgamates "prey." Corn cobs, for example, are sometimes drawn to resemble disarticulated human heads (Proulx 2006, pp. 110, 166). The practice of combining two or more animal body parts to create visual composites will be discussed below. For now, it suffices to note that the prominent appearance of severed human heads subject to avian predation, as pictured on the AMNH fragment, does not so much document natural and common occurrences as it constructs a series of visual analogies by pictorially asserting the commensurability of all prey.



Figure 7. Unknown Proto-Nasca painter and weaver, detail of a cotton textile depicting seabirds and their prey, 100 BCE–100 CE, 63 × 58 cm, American Museum of Natural History 41.2/5917, gift of Junius Bird, 1966.



Figure 8. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, vessel depicting a warrior holding both weapons and human heads by the hair, 100 BCE–500 CE, approx. 38.7 × 29.2 cm, Art Institute of Chicago 1955.2077, Kate S. Buckingham Endowment.



Figure 9. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, vessel depicting a composite figure grabbing a severed head by the hair, 250–400 CE, height 15.875 cm, Denver Art Museum, gift of Hugh J. Smith, Jr., 1954.144. Photograph © Denver Art Museum.

Disarticulated human heads are the most common of all depicted prey, constituting both primary and secondary subject matter from Paracas (*c.* 700 BCE–100 CE) through late Nasca times and beyond. Imagery of what are apparently severed heads shows them alone and also held in the hands, beaks, claws, or paws of various predators. Depictions vary: sometimes mouths are pinned shut by cactus spine needles or huarango thorns and sometimes the lids are closed, but in other cases the eyes are half circles with the pupils turned upwards.[8] Occasionally, decapitation is indicated by the undersides of head-shaped vessels painted red (Figure 10). In late Nasca phases the act of decapitation itself is depicted.[9] Severed head imagery corresponds to the curation of actual human heads: mouths and eyes were sealed, and ropes were attached so that the crania might be carried. In imagery as in life, humans actively participated in and were subjected to cycles of life and death.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 10. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, severed head effigy vessel, c. 100–350 CE, 22 × 20.5 × 24.5 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art 1997.2, James Albert and Mary Gardiner Ford Memorial Fund. (**a**) Face. (**b**) Bottom.

The prominence of birds on the Proto-Nasca cloth is not surprising. Paracas visual culture, which gave rise to the Nasca tradition, features birds in its imagery not only with the greatest frequency, but (next to human beings) as the most varied type of animal (Paul 1992, p. 283). Later Nasca imagery also emphasizes the predatory activity of birds. The painter of the AMNH textile assiduously delineated an array of coastal avian predators. Some have sharply pointed beaks, while the bills of others are blunted and slightly curled up at the ends. Some have white curlicue motifs surrounding their eyes, some feature reddish eyebrows, and still others boast the breeding-season feather crests of male guanay cormorants (*L. bougainvilliorum*). Nevertheless, because Nasca artists exercised considerable creativity when rendering feather patterns, species identification is often impossible and

it should be noted that south-coastal peoples did not always depict animals (or plants) in ways that enable taxonomic classification according to Euro-Western scientific schema.[10] Still, it is clear that the painter endeavored to illustrate the diversity of predacious seabirds.

While the AMNH textile analogizes human beings with other prey, south-coastal imagery, as noted earlier, also switches the role of humans by depicting them as predators. Human predation includes both warfare (humans in conflict with other humans) and hunting (humans aggressing against other animals and "capturing" edible flora). Although the imagery characterizes both activities as overwhelmingly masculine, females are occasionally depicted holding fruits or root crops in the same manner as men who similarly grasp edible flora and human heads.[11] South-coastal imagery thus asks human viewers to identify with both sides of predation and did so by means of visual analogy.

Analogies are comparisons requiring contemplation, which is to say that analogies encourage viewers to think through the possibilities and implications of likeness. What might viewers have been invited to contemplate not just by identifying the large categories of predator and prey, but by placing humans in both categories? Also, why combine natural behaviors (seabirds hunting fish, for example) and nonnatural behaviors (seabirds taking human heads)? And, finally, how might we understand the participation of the south-coastal imaginary—particularly what I describe as composite beings—in predator–prey relations? To address these questions, we consider the ways the ontological predisposition of the ancient inhabitants of Peru's south coast inclined them to understand both predators and prey in terms of likeness (analogy) rather than difference (incongruity).

3. Relationality and Multinaturalism

The predator–prey relationship in Andean thought has not been extensively discussed. It has, however, been debated for societies elsewhere in South America, particularly in Amazonia where indispensable ethnographic information might help span some of the chasms in south-coastal Andean history.[12] The anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, working with peoples of the Upper Xingu (Mato Grosso, Brazil), employs the term "perspectivism" to describe the ontological disposition of many Indigenous American peoples to regard all beings as possessing perspectives particular to their species (Viveiros de Castro 1998).[13] The phrase "other-than-human" is employed here to denote all things with whom humans establish relationships. In the Andes, "other-than-human" includes all manner of flora, fauna, spirit essences, natural phenomena, and inert beings (whether natural or artifactual) such as rocks and weavings.

A critical aspect of perspectivism recognizes that the concept of multiculturalism, according to which different cultures interpret the (one) world differently, is ill suited to describe Indigenous perspectives. Viveiros de Castro (1998) introduces the idea of multinaturalism, which conceives of a single broadly defined culture shared by all persons, both human and other-than-human, but many natures. He asks his readers to relinquish the notion that there is a single "real," knowable world which can be perceived and described objectively. Aparecida Vilaça, who also works in Amazonia (specifically with the Wari' of Rondônia, Brazil), states the case simply: "there is no pre-given natural or objective universe" (Vilaça 2005, p. 456).

Multinaturalism proposes that all beings construct their worlds through their senses, but, because of their subjectivities, their worlds (natures) are decidedly different one from the other. Viveiros de Castro (1998, p. 478) provides the following example: "what to us [humans] is blood, is maize beer to the jaguar." Vilaça (2005, p. 457) amplifies his example, explaining that the "Wari' know that *what* blood is depends on *who* is looking" (emphasis added). All vibrant beings eat, but what is consumed is different: jaguars savor blood, humans desire maize beer, hummingbirds thirst for nectar, and crayfish crave pollywogs.

In these examples, ingesting specific foods or drink can be seen as a part of a shared culture in which all beings consume, but the object of consumption differs thereby constituting many subjective, distinct, and often irreconcilable natures.

Notably, according to south-coastal imagery, a few other-than-human animals share particularly close relationships with humans. Of these, the pampas cat is the most frequently depicted. This feline is recognizable by its distinctive pelt: crescent markings on the back and striped tail and legs (Figure 5). The sight of carnivorous felines holding fruits or vegetables in the manner of human harvesters conveys its alignment with *Homo sapiens* and invites us to look for ties that bind humans to the small feline. Art historian Anne Paul proposes that pampas cats were perceived as guardians of human crops, protecting the vegetation from rodents and other animals that feed on cultigens; she interprets images of wild cats holding fruits and vegetables as "metaphor[s] for the life-giving properties of the earth, functioning as . . . ideogram[s] of an earth cult" (Paul 1992, pp. 284–85).

Looking through the lens of Indigenous relationality offers an alternative way of understanding the portrayal of pampas cats. Animals that prey on crops, such as mice, deprive human beings of their sustenance. Images of pampas cats holding up edible flora employ visual analogy to align mice with crops and cats with humans. The depiction of cats with crops also characterizes feline rodent hunters as "feeders" of humans. In complementary fashion, humans plant crops thereby creating an enticing environment for rodents and other vermin. As a result, humans provide wild cats with a contained killing field, becoming "feeders" of cats. Significantly, the Nasca do not portray cats consuming humans while other south coast predators—such as culpeos, orcas, and some birds (including condors and seabirds)—do, despite the fact that their natural predation is not focused on humans. According to Nasca imagery, cats were perceived as close human allies while other predators were not.

Across the Andes, complementarity was (and still is) highly valued. In Quechua, an Andean language, for example, pairs that work together—with each partner benefiting from that association—are described as *yanantin*, a term identifying complementary (as opposed to antagonistic) pairs. Toads, like pampas cats, are also depicted harvesting consumable crops (Figure 6), and are pictorially allied to humans in *yanantin* relationships: toads consume insects that damage crops. Toads were also associated with water and fertility because they require water to reproduce. On the hyper-arid south coast, where riverbeds are dry for much of the year, toads' interests in water aligned with those of humans who relied on the availability of water for crop production. Pictorial pampas cats and toads (among others) are depicted with human food not because they consume it or because they are (or represent) deities who govern human agricultural activity, but because it enhances their natural predation. So too do human harvesters value feline and amphibian predation that benefits the human world. It is only through the notion of a single "nature" (or one reality) that the images of carnivores and insectivores with vegetal motifs appear "unnatural."

The Nasca are known largely through archaeology, which has been hampered by looting since ancient times and modern agrobusiness; it is also limited when accounting for immaterial things like ontology, epistemology, and ideology. The linked concepts of perspectivism and multinaturalism, which emphasize relational ontology, urge us to seek out the intersecting or complementary interests of humans and certain other-than-humans to guide us towards an understanding of the seeming contradictions or inexplicabilities in Nasca imagery. Although historically scholars have tended to explain the "unnatural" through the lens of religion or ritual, Indigenous relationality offers us an alternative hermeneutic path when considering the visuality of archaeological societies.[14] If it is the case that Nasca peoples developed their world consistent with relational ontology, then

humans—who created the imagery under consideration here—recognized and appreciated the abilities of certain other-than-humans and sometimes understood their relationships as collaborative, complementary, and mutually beneficial. Moreover, the naturalness or "reality" of either predators or prey was not bothersome; reality's variability was a purposeful and thoughtful feature of Nasca visuality, gesturing toward multinaturalistic, holistic, and ecosystemic ways of thinking.

4. Meta-Predators

Some of the most common subjects of south-coastal potters and weavers were composite entities whose bodies comprise parts of various predators, especially humans. Notably, predacious composites prey on other predators, including other composites. Given the prominence of predacious birds, it is not surprising that visual composites often have wings and feathered tails, and some have birds' feet; pampas cat features are also present in numerous composites: pelt markings for camouflage; ears referencing exceptional hearing; claws for stealth and capture; and tails for balance and enhanced agility (Figure 11). Pampas cat whiskers, enabling superior sensing, are the most likely source for the elaborate nose ornaments (sometimes referred to as masks) displayed by high-status males both in reality and in imagery (Figure 12).[15]



Figure 11. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, vessel depicting a predacious composite with bird's wings, feline face, human hands and feet, 50–500 CE, 15 × 15 cm, Art Institute of Chicago 1955.2128, Kate S. Buckingham Endowment.



Figure 12. Nasca metalworker unknown, whiskered nose ornament, 100 BCE–700 CE, hammered gold alloy, 14 × 19.4 cm), Cleveland Museum of Art, 1945.377, J.H. Wade Fund.

So many composites sport whiskered nose ornaments that it is often the defining element of an entity dubbed the Masked Mythical Being (Roark 1965, pp. 39–42), the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being (Proulx 2006, p. 62), or the Masked Being (Carmichael 2015, p. 132). This much discussed polyonymous figure has been associated with a variable set of characteristics. While Carmichael (2015, p. 152) is able to propose a precise set

of identifiers to recognize the earliest renditions of the "Masked Being"—a mouth mask (by which he means the whiskered nose ornament), distinctive diadem, bangles that fall from either the ears or the headdress, shell collar, and frequent association with trophy heads—myriad variations appear over time. Donald A. Proulx, studying the whole of Nasca imagery, describes a constellation of masked supernatural or sacred entities that he subdivides into 16 major variations with subtypes (Proulx 2006, pp. 62–79). The only consistent features over the centuries in which this "being" (if it is a single entity) appears in south-coastal imagery are: wide open eyes on a frontal face; whiskered nose ornament; a forehead ornament or headdress; and at least one zoomorphic (vs. anthropomorphic) element.[16] In late Nasca phases this masked "being" is represented by visual synecdoche in which just a part of the composite—often just an abbreviated face with whiskered nose mask—surrogates the complete body.

The origins of this masked composite being are rooted in the Paracas Oculate Being, an entity characterized primarily by large eyes and an upturned mouth on a frontally oriented oversized head; it sometimes has a tail and often grasps a human head, establishing an early and fundamental relationship with the taking and curation of disarticulated heads (Figure 13; Carmichael 2016, pp. 69–74). When the Oculate Being lacks a tail, it is basically anthropomorphic and so intersects with late Paracas images of human warriors holding severed heads. While later masked composites exhibit great variation, the pictorial emphasis on disembodied human heads remains constant over time. Heads are grasped in the hands of masked composites and appear on their interiors, on the borders, or at the termination of their mantles or streamers (also called signifers). Additional motifs associated with warfare are bloody clubs, spears or darts, and other weaponry. In addition to heads, Oculate Beings collect vegetal consumables and so employ visual analogy in advance of the Nasca phases. Additionally, some renditions of the Oculate Being, including the Paracas bowl pictured in Figure 13, couple the "being" with pampas cats, constituting an early link between the anthropomorphic head-collecting entity and felines.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 13. Unknown Paracas ceramicist, bowl, 350 BCE–60 CE, 5.4 × 17.5 × 17.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art 63.232.79, gift of Nathan Cummings (1963). (**a**) Bowl interior featuring an Oculate Being holding a severed head. (**b**) Bowl exterior depicting profile felines.

The Nasca masked composite aligns with other composite entities who are also assemblages of predatory abilities. In addition to the "Anthropomorphic Mythical Being," Proulx (2006) provides an essential guide to the key traits of many other composites, all of which he identifies as sacred themes in Nasca imagery: the Horrible Bird, combining elements from different bird species (condor and falcon) and often including anthropomorphic elements (pp. 79–83; Figure 14); the Mythical Killer Whale, consisting of an orca's body with a human arm and hand that often grasps a severed human head or knife (pp. 83–87; Figure 15); the so-called Harpy, featuring a human head on an avian body (p. 88; Figure 16);[17] and

"Serpentine Creatures," assemblages of serpent or centipede (or, I would add, caterpillar) bodies with feline faces and paws and/or severed human heads (pp. 94–96).[18]



Figure 14. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, jar depicting a "Horrible Bird," 180 BCE–500 CE, 13 × 14.9 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Kate S. Buckingham Endowment 1955.2059.



Figure 15. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, double-spout bottle depicting two orcas, one of which grasps a severed human head, 1–400 CE, height 17.1 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 64.228.70, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Cummings.



Figure 16. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, bowl depicting "Harpies" with clubs over a row of human heads, 300–500 CE, 9.74 × 15.88 cm, Dallas Museum of Art, 1983.W.192, the Nora and John Wise Collection, bequest of John Wise. Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art.

Significant results have emerged from the identification of specific composite beings and assigning individuating designations to them. Still, many composites fall outside established categories. Indeed, the variation is so great even within named groups that the borders between them are often blurred. For example, the pampas cat body with a humanoid face (Figure 17) reverses the more typical image of a feline head on a human body (Figure 11). Additionally, it is not clear whether many masked composites are imaginary entities or are actually humans in composite dress. Despite valiant efforts, it is not possible to list the full range of south coast composites much less taxonomize them (Nieves 2009); in fact, the more hybridity is the focus, the more composite entities seem to emerge.



Figure 17. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, jar depicting two pampas cat bodies with human faces and falcon eye markings, 1–500 CE, 7.5 × 13.3 cm, Harvard University Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 53-13-30/7412.

Nasca imagery is replete with human figures described as zoomorphized or other-than-humans described as anthropomorphized. Both terms evoke oppositional binaries, suggesting that one type of animal is seen as approximating or becoming another. Indigenous relationality, in contrast, hints that Nasca imagery may accentuate not a shift from one kind of being to another, but co-identification according to which human males share or desire to share predacious capacities with other-than-humans. In other words, co-identification emphasizes sharing with an Other, identifying commonalities while simultaneously maintaining difference. Although Nasca imagery emphasizes human participation in co-identification, it does not require it. Images of flying fish (discussed above), for example, combine piscine bodies and avian wings to show the shared ability of flight. Visual compositing gathers predacious parts within a single body to express a common culture (a single predatory body) with many natures (the body's individual parts). Nasca composites are thus not so much fantastical creatures, which can be distinguished, categorized, and named, as they are another means (in addition to visual analogy) of envisaging multinaturalism.

If predacious composites are visualizations of multinaturalism—the idea of predation shared across species, but with variations that visualize distinct natures—we might understand them as meta-predators and as examples of what anthropologist Carlos Fausto (2020, p. 271), in his consideration of predators and prey in Brazilian Amazonia (specifically the Parakanã of Pará and Kuikuro of Mato Grosso), calls the asymptotic identification of predator species. He employs this terminology to describe co-identification in which two things are alike but also always distinctive. If south-coastal meta-predators are multinatural manifestations of predation rather than individualized "beings," they may suggest predation itself, entifying predation while visualizing its myriad forms. Compositing creates a visible body for a shared culture while acknowledging its changeable—which is to say its multiple—natures. Perhaps meta-predators are not so much "beings" as they are "doings" with the "doing" specified as predation.

5. Human Beings as Meta-Predators

High-status south-coastal males constructed themselves—in life and in imagery—as composites of predacious abilities. They garbed themselves in parts of other-than-human predators recreating their own bodies as meta-predators. Not only does the omnipresent whiskered nose ornament align human wearers with felines, a common forehead ornament—shaped like a frontally viewed bird in flight and worn from Paracas through Nasca times—linked human wearers to birds, the most prolific of predators (Figures 18 and 19).



Figure 18. Unknown Nasca metalworker, bird-shaped forehead ornament, 100 BCE–700 CE, hammered gold alloy, 27.4 × 9.3 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art 1940.509, Norweb Collection.



Figure 19. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, single-spout vessel depicting a seated male wearing forehead and nose ornaments, holding a disembodied head and club, 21 × 12.1 cm, Art Institute of Chicago 1955.2160, Kate S. Buckingham Endowment.

In addition to aviform forehead and other ornaments, feathers of various bird species adorned the headdresses of early south-coastal men and were woven into both tunics and mantles where they may have functioned to endow the wearer with the sight and hunting skills of birds. Relatedly, clothing often depicts birds or replicates bird plumage. For example, both zigzag and black-and-white checkered patterns mimic the feathers of aplomado falcons (*Falco femoralis*) (Figures 20 and 21) as did the eye markings of high-status males (Figures 17 and 21). Whether or not sporting aviform insignia or wearing images of birds endowed the wearer with a bird's abilities, at the very least the imagery makes a visual claim likening elite male wearers to predatory avians.

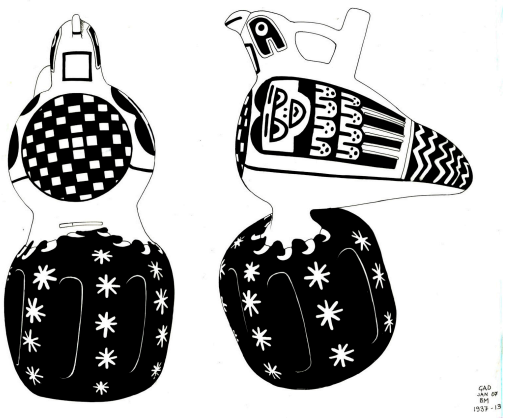


Figure 20. Falcon (frontal and profile) perched on a San Pedro cactus; a checkered pattern adorns the bird's breast, its tail feathers feature zig-zag lines, and on its wings, are severed heads, British Museum Nasca Archive drawing from a modeled vessel by an unknown Nasca ceramicist, 100 BCE–600 CE, height c. 6 cm, British Museum Am1937-13; Rollout © The Trustees of the British Museum; line drawing by Garth Denning.

In some depictions men don culpeo pelts, echoing the actual pelts that have been found in Paracas and Nasca burial bundles wrapped around corpses, along with both plain and elaborately decorated woven mantles and a variety of offerings. In the Andes, clothing was understood to be the outer layer of skin (Arnold and Yapita 2013, p. 112); thus, textiles, like animal pelts and bird feathers, were part of the body and not apart from it. Moreover, because clothing shared the thoughts, experiences, and the abilities of the person that wore them (Dean 2026), culpeo pelts surely functioned to imbue the wearer with the canine's predatory skills and superior adaptability to the south coast environment.[19]



Figure 21. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, vessel in the form of man with falcon eye markings and clothing with a falcon's chest feather pattern, 1–500 CE, height 33 cm, Harvard University Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 09-3-30/75658.

Imagery of apparent human beings with other-than-human predatory attributes supplements actual practices such as the wearing of pelts and feathers and clothing and regalia patterned after predators. In early south-coastal imagery what otherwise look like human beings sometimes have prehensile feet, which is to say feet that resemble hands with opposable thumbs (Figure 22). The template for such feet could be spider monkeys imported to the south coast from the Amazon; indeed, monkeys, with prehensile feet for superior agility, appear on late Paracas, Proto-Nasca, and Nasca materials.[20]

Nearly all predacious motifs trace to animal origins, but at least one plant should be considered: cacti. Barrel-shaped cacti with spine clusters (likely San Pedro [*Echinopsis pachanoi*]) grow from the shoulders of meta-predators (Proulx 2006, p. 172). Its spines, which function as defensive weaponry, are emphasized by Nasca artists both on depictions of cacti and as attributes of meta-predators (Figures 20 and 23). Because San Pedro cacti have hallucinogenic properties, pictures of the plant may reference rituals through which warriors secured supernatural protection. Significantly, in Amazonia psychotropic flora are consumed to enhance human capacities and are associated with large predators (Fausto 2007, p. 507). Andean peoples, including those on Peru's south coast, may have attributed similar powers to the prickly plant.



Figure 22. Unknown Paracas Necropolis or Proto-Nasca embroiderer, mantle detail depicting an anthropomorphic figure with stepped face paint and prehensile feet holding a pampas cat, 100 BCE–100 CE, camelid fiber, mantle size: 238.1 × 106.7 cm, Art Institute of Chicago 1970.293, Emily Crane Chadbourne Fund.



Figure 23. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, bowl depicting a mostly anthropomorphic meta-predator (not fully seen here), with its body marked by clusters of cactus thorns, captures an unclothed diadem-wearing male in its right hand (its unpictured left hand clasps a severed head). The male captures an unclothed female who holds a club in one hand and a disarticulated head in the other. Also depicted (but not seen in this view) are a second meta-predator and a version of the "horrible bird", 100 BCE–700 CE, height 13 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art 1949.561, gift of John Wise.

Anthropomorphic bodies with cactus spines, wings, prehensile feet, claws, talons, whiskers, and so on visualize the accumulation of predacious abilities. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that high-status males are often hard to distinguish from meta-predators and that together they dominate the south-coastal visual corpus. Still, while the imagery of predation primarily contributed to the status of male elites, Figure 23 with its succession of predators includes an armed, head-taking female. Even as she and the male who has captured her are clearly prey—likely deceased, as indicated by their lack of clothing and prominent ribs—apparently, before death they were successful predators. And, as noted

above, by virtue of analogy female harvesters participated in the culture of predation. Thus, while pictorial predation was mostly associated with and surely augmented the status of powerful men, all human adults engaged in predatory behaviors.

Moreover, predation was not restricted to the living. Figure 24 replicates an image from a Paracas Necropolis embroidery, contemporaneous with Proto-Nasca, depicting one anthropomorphic figure taking a bite out of another. Because of features identified with the dead in Paracas imagery (loose and flowing hair, skeletonized ribs, and visages like those of severed heads), both consumer and consumed, appear to be deceased humans. Based on iconographical study, Andean textile expert Mary Frame argues that the small back-bent figure is more recently deceased than the larger consumer and that the mature dead feed on the newly deceased (Frame 2001, pp. 84–85).[21] If so, it appears that ancestors also participated in predator–prey relations; furthermore, they assumed both roles, just as did the living.

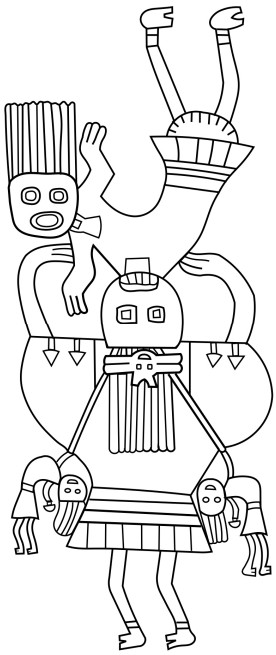


Figure 24. Line drawing after Frame (2001, fig. 4.24) showing two embroidered figures, the larger consuming the back-bent smaller, from a Paracas Necropolis man's skirt, 262-34, Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología, e Historia del Perú (Lima) 3045.

6. The Power of Prey

Revisiting Figure 23, the viewer observes a predacious hierarchy from an imposing meta-predator at the apex down to a small, disarticulated head. The function of human head collecting, conservation, and curation, as well as the significance of the ubiquitous disembodied head in south-coastal imagery, has been the topic of considerable discussion.[22] While many questions remain unanswered, there is consensus that some of the head collecting occurred in the context of warfare, but that the heads served some religious function.[23] Archaeologist Christina A. Conlee observes that the "uses and meanings [of severed heads] likely changed over time. . .." (Conlee 2007, p. 439). There is, however, general agreement, based on ethnographic and iconographic information, that both collected and pictorial heads were, across time, associated with fertility. Because the pictorial emphasis, across most of Nasca history, is less about taking heads than about possessing them, most students of Nasca society agree that severed heads are improperly described as "trophies" (Arnold and Hastorf 2008, p. 23).

An intriguing motif of both Paracas and Nasca predators (composites as well as "natural")—and one that hints at the importance of having and holding heads—is the tongue extended as if to "taste" the crania (Figures 13, 22 and 25).[24] While severed human heads are more common, full anthropomorphic bodies and other predatory animals are also tasted. Sometimes the tongue extends from the lower lip or even the chin of the taster; in some depictions the tongue is triangular, in others it is rendered as a line or rectangle, and sometimes it transforms into the tongue or other part of the consumed prey. So common is the imagery of "tasting" that the depiction of an extended tongue is meaningful even when the prey is not touched by the extended tongue (Figures 5, 9, 11 and 16), or is absent altogether, in which case the tongue, seeking sustenance, calls upon viewers to imagine future predation (Figure 26).



Figure 25. A second view of the vessel in Figure 23 showing a winged meta-predator "tasting" a severed head. The left arm of the anthropomorphic meta-predator is seen on the left and the head of a "horrible bird" is to the right.



Figure 26. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, cup depicting a meta-predator with extended tongue, 300–500 CE, height 13.65 cm, Dallas Museum of Art 1976.W.185, the Nora and John Wise Collection, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jake L. Hamon, the Eugene McDermott Family, Mr. and Mrs. Algur H. Meadows and the Meadows Foundation, Incorporated, and Mr. and Mrs. John D. Murchison. Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art.

Denise Arnold (2018, pp. 246, 256) uses information provided by her colleagues in Qaqachaka, Bolivia, as well as from Amazonia, to argue that, in the past, male warriors in the Bolivian highlands seized enemy heads and presented them to female partners. Through a process of objectification (the curation of the heads) and re-subjectification (appeasing and supplicating them), the life energy contained in crania was not only transferred to the warriors, but integrated into the warriors' community and its ancestral store: the Other became Self and the enemy became kin. Some head jars may "present" actual ancestors (as opposed to representing them; see Dean 2025, p. 6), but, as discussed below, heads taken from non-ancestors became ancestral through curation. Thus, conceptually all heads—both natural and artifactual—were ancestral.

Ethnographic work in the Andes explains the benevolent role of most ancestral beings in the fertility of the community (Allen 1982, p. 185; 1988; Bastien 1978, pp. 171–87). The deceased and the location of deposition became co-identified, such that ancestors and the soil that nurtures future generations merged (Allen 1982, pp. 183–85; 1988, p. 123). In Quechua a single word (*mallqui*) means both branch or sapling and ancestor. Ancestors, who dwell in the Underworld, give rise to the living, but they require procreative energy to produce both human and other-than-human progeny. Heads, as visual shorthand for ancestral regenerative energy congregating below ground, ensured good harvests, empowered new births, and contributed to the prosperity of head-holders more generally. Although the impulse of modern viewers may be to interpret disarticulated heads as grisly reminders of death, viewing them through the lens of the "life from death continuum," renders them as promises of vivification (Carmichael 1994).

Through head taking, human warriors both enhanced their own status as predators and, because the possession of heads augmented the vivacity of their communities, bolstered leadership positions. The south-coastal tongue-tasting motif—in which the tongue bridges the body's exterior and interior—visualizes energy transfer and the passage of vibrancy or life energy from the body of the tasted to the taster and the taster's community. Importantly, the depicted transmission is just one of myriad through which vibrancy circulates through the cosmos in a reciprocal process of giving and taking that affects all things. Ethnographer Catherine J. Allen, writing about "liveliness" and its transferability in current Andean thought, identifies "objects that concentrate special generative powers" and enable the flow of vibrancy as *illas* (Allen 1988, p. 54). On the early south coast, heads—certainly actual and probably ceramic—apparently functioned as *illas*.[25] Like seeds (including beans), they gave rise to and nourished future generations; indeed, Frame (1995, p. 14) likens the body of the newly dead to seeds that will sprout and grow.

Nasca imagery features human heads in association with the growth of flora; when those heads are associated with the bodies of meta-predators, the positive results of energy transfer are made explicit. Sprouting plants resemble tasting tongues, taking the head's energy to feed plant growth and completing a cycle of regeneration (Figure 27). While many of the generative heads display features of decapitated crania, this is not necessarily the case. The best-known visualization of a head's generative powers comes from a jar excavated by Conlee (2007, pp. 440–43) from a burial containing a decapitated adult male (aged 20–25) at the south-coastal site of La Tiza (Figure 28).[26] Although a flowering tree—with eyes of its own—grows from the top of its skull, the human visage does not include any of the features associated with curated heads. In fact, its protruding tongue is that of a predator seeking or consuming energy. The La Tiza jar documents energy transfer and explicitly identifies ancestors as sources of fertility who themselves require feeding. Because the burial from which the jar was excavated was associated with an earlier cemetery and habitation zone, Conlee (ibid., p. 438) concludes that the practice of head taking was associated with rituals

of fertility and regeneration linked to the role of ancestors; the jar's imagery supports Conlee's inferences.

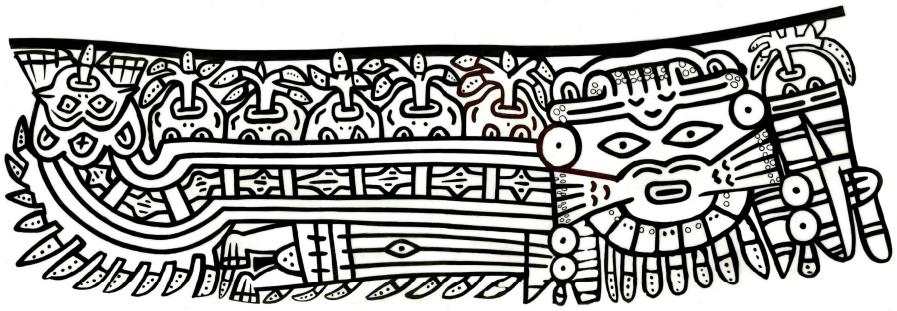


Figure 27. Line drawing of a meta-predator with severed heads attached to its club and mantle; plants emerge from the heads' mouths and also grow from the meta-predator's body. British Museum Nasca Archive drawing 0125 from a cup by an unknown Nasca ceramicist, 100 BCE–600 CE, c. 6 cm, British Museum Am1938-12; Rollout © The Trustees of the British Museum; line drawing by Garth Denning.



Figure 28. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, vessel excavated at La Tiza depicting a human head with extended tongue and a flowering tree growing from its cranium. Photograph courtesy of Christina A. Conlee.

Plants growing from crania parallel imagery in which birds (frequently depicted predators) derive energy from heads. Early Nasca imagery features downward facing birds with their pointy beaks—like the sharp tongues of tasters—drilling into crania (Figure 29). Pairings of both plants and birds with heads form a visual analogy in which plants (commonly pictured as prey) join the ranks of predators. In the Andes today, plants are understood to be living, sentient beings; when seeds sprout, they are said to give birth (Allen 1982, p. 182). Surely this was the case in Nasca times. An embroidered fragment from a textile's border documents generative processes in which a composite female human-bean's tongue takes in energy while her umbilical cord nourishes a young plant, and a blooming human-manioc male alludes to pollination through which new plants will arise (Figure 30). Like animals, plants both feed and are fed; they, too, are both predators and prey.



Figure 29. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, severed-head vessel with hummingbirds, 350–450 CE, 15 × 13.3 × 12.5 cm, © Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington D.C., PC.B.597.



Figure 30. Unknown Proto-Nasca or Nasca embroiderer, border fragment detail depicting anthropomorphic crops: a female bean with extended tongue and umbilical cord (upper) and a blooming male manioc (lower), 250 BCE–50 CE, camelid fiber, 6.35 cm (height), Dallas Museum of Art, The Nora and John Wise Collection, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jake L. Hamon, the Eugene McDermott Family, Mr. and Mrs. Algur H. Meadows and the Meadows Foundation, Incorporated, and Mr. and Mrs. John D. Murchison, 1976.W.2095. Image courtesy of the Dallas Museum of Art.

7. Conclusions: The Predator–Prey Paradigm and Its Discontents

While occasionally prey are visually accentuated (Figure 31), both Paracas and Nasca imagery emphasize predation. In the vast majority of dyads, prey are smaller and passive,

subject to the action of predators. The roles of predator and prey are not fixed, however, but are constantly reconfigured, indicating a south-coastal interest in predation as an action in which all beings participate. Even meta-predators, with their formidable abilities, give. They are fed upon not only by birds, but unimposing consumers like rodents or small fish (Figures 32 and 33). If meta-predators are entifications of predation itself, they also implicate the obligation to donate.

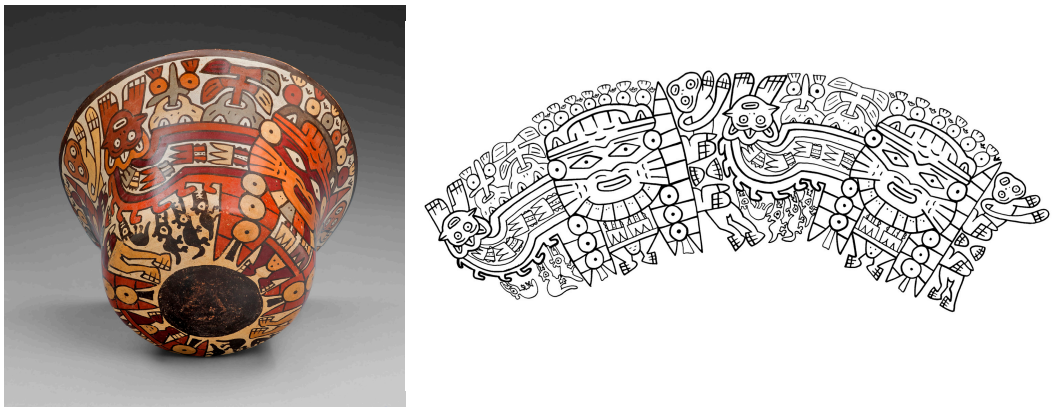


Figure 31. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, double-spout vessel depicting two small predatory birds overlooking oversized lizards, 100 BCE–500 CE, height 29.7 cm, Art Institute of Chicago 1955.2096, Kate S. Buckingham Endowment.



Figure 32. Line drawing of a meta-predator with birds pecking at its head and vegetal motifs grow from its body. British Museum Nasca Archive Drawing 0128 from a double-spout bottle by an unknown Nasca ceramicist, 100 BCE–600 CE, British Museum Am1931-1123.3; Rollout © The Trustees of the British Museum; line drawing by Garth Denning.

Although the lexicon of predation has been useful heretofore, it is now clear that predators are prey and prey predate; no being (living or dead) is categorically fixed. The ancient Andean principle of reciprocity insists that takers must eventually give and that givers will take. Consequently, terms like "taker" and "giver," which avoid active/passive positionality, would better express the nexus of reciprocity and relationality in early south-coastal thought. Rather than undermining sociality through predator–prey oppositions, which provoke endless antagonistic cycles of violence, reciprocity positions taking and giving as necessary complements. When humans and other-than-humans succumb—whether in violent or natural death—they join the cosmic flow of regenerative energy.[27] What humans (and others) gain is ancestorhood and the prosperity of their descendants: death was pictorially (and probably rhetorically) characterized as the ultimate act of "giving" and as a critical contribution to cosmological procreativity.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 33. Unknown Nasca ceramicist, 100–500 CE, 10.2 × 17.2 cm, Art Institute of Chicago 1955.1934, Kate S. Buckingham Endowment. (**a**) Bowl depicting two mostly human meta-predators, with mantles bordered by heads sprouting plants, ripping human bodies in half. Below each of their mantles are small quadrupeds, likely rodents, that nibble or suck on the mantle's underside. (**b**) Line drawing after Townsend (1985, fig. 21).

The visual analogy between hunting and harvesting crops was born in a period of transition. The late Paracas and contemporaneous Proto-Nasca epochs witnessed an increased shift in human subsistence activity from hunting, fishing, and gathering to agriculture based on riparian irrigation. The populations in south-coastal valleys grew as humans developed hydrological systems that supported larger populations and coped with the region's hyperaridity (Beresford-Jones and Whaley 2021; Carmichael et al. 2014). Adaptations in the early Nasca phases included changing the locations of settlements as well as settlement patterns and sizes; ritual and burial practices changed as well. These adjustments invite us to take a closer look at ways visual analogy frames all taker–giver/giver–taker pairings as visual expressions of peoples seeking to understand, visually document, and respond to the workings of their delicate ecosystem. David Beresford-Jones terms their understanding "riparian consciousness," which was recorded on crockery and shared across the region (Beresford-Jones 2011) .

According to relational thought, the cosmos and all things in it are always in transition, produced through the actions of, and interactions with, other beings and forces. All give and all take; one action implicates its complement. Pictures of prey—fruit, ready for consumption, or lizards sunning themselves, blissfully unaware of a looming avian threat (Figure 31)—record isolated moments in the cycle of giving and taking. Such imagery may illustrate a moment, but always alludes to future action: predation implies future regeneration and an infinite cycle of life energy throughout the biosphere. Even though takers and givers might appear antagonistic, in cosmic terms the pairings figure as complements forming *yanantin*.

Early Nasca imagery alludes to the vital balance between taking and giving—an equilibrium sustained on the south coast for hundreds of years—yet it is takers that dominate the pictorial corpus. Concomitantly, Nasca imagery appears primarily on items associated with taking: ceramics made of clay procured from the living earth and designed for food consumption. The imagery largely credits acquisition to high-status males who act as meta-takers whether by direct depiction or through visual analogy. The fundamental "taker" activities of eating and drinking from decorated crockery reminded human viewers of their reciprocal obligations while also reinforcing the positions of male elites.

Overtime, the emphasis on "taking" seems to have overwhelmed "giving." Archaeological materials indicate a thriving south-coastal agrarianism that persisted into Spanish

colonial times when a reliable sixteenth-century Spanish author extolled the lush Nasca woodlands (Cieza de León 1553, p. 91r); however, evidence also indicates a slow, centuries-long collapse of the ecosystem resulting in the current desiccated and depopulated south-coastal landscape (Beresford-Jones 2011). What changed between early Nasca times and now, is the devastation of a keystone species: the huarango (*Prosopis limensis*), a deep rooted, long lived, drought resistant, shade providing, water distributing, and nitrogen fixing tree that provided animals with a substantial source of sustenance as well as building material, wood for fuel and weapons, black dye, and fiber for cordage (ibid., pp. 155–82).

South-coastal imagery also changed. Beginning late in the Nasca sequence, scenes of intra-Nasca violence and competition increased. Also, the immigration of non-local Andean peoples (Warpa and Wari) and their conversion of woodlands to monocrops (cotton and possibly coca) adversely affected south-coastal ecology (ibid., p. 224). Old-growth huarango stands, once stewarded by early Nasca peoples, were felled and modern technology has only increased the rate of destruction. Without huarangos, the equilibrium critical to the south-coastal ecosystem, utterly collapsed taking with it south-coastal agrarian society.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: Grants from the Arts Division at the University of California, Santa Cruz, supported this research. My thanks also to museums who gave access to their collections for both in-person and on-line study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 Nasca society was not consolidated into a single state. Following Silverman (2002, p. xvi), "Nasca" refers to the archaeological culture and style of visual expression, while "Nazca" identifies the geographical location. See Nieves (2023, p. 23n.1) for a summation of the orthographic controversy.

2 Culpeos (*Lycalopex culpaeus*), related to jackals and wolves, are not true foxes. The name "culpeo" comes from the Mapuche word "culpem" meaning "madness," referring to the canid's imprudent bravery (Jiménez and Novaro 2004). Peters (1991, pp. 310 and 314n.9) notes an interest in predation in the imagery of both Paracas and Topará, which figure as south-coastal precursors to Nasca visual culture.

3 Illustration by the author; vessel is in the collection of Harvard University Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 54-41-30/7541.

4 González Holguín (1608, bk 1, p. 151), in his early seventeenth-century Quechua dictionary, defines *haylli* as a "*canto regozijado en guerra, o chacras bien acabadas y vencidas*" (joyful song in war or of victory when agricultural labor has been finished successfully).

5 The animal, sometimes called "spotted cat" or "colocolo" in the literature, likely portrays one of several distinct species all of which have, to various degrees, spotted pelts with ringed tails and legs. The most likely is *Leopardus garleppi*, a small, wild feline that inhabits semi-arid environments and is found throughout the Andean area.

6 This study is based largely on late Paracas (Paracas phase 10), Proto-Nasca (Nasca phases 1 and 2), and what are traditionally described as early to middle Nasca (phases 3–4 and 5, respectively). Recent archaeological work problematizes the standard seriation of Nasca ceramics according to which simpler imagery predates visual complexity and indicates that some of these phases may have overlapped (Carmichael 2019; Conlee et al. 2024; Vaughn et al. 2014). In general, I focus here on imagery that features relatively few primary figures that are less complicated and so easier to "read," than those associated with later Nasca phases (see Proulx 2006). In the course of this study over 2500 artifacts—mostly ceramic, but also weavings—were examined, both in person and via on-line collections. The artifacts selected for publication here reflect my bias towards institutions that make high-resolution scans available for scholarly inquiry free of charge.

7 The Nasca did not distinguish between toads and frogs. Given the arid environment, most are likely toads (Proulx 2006, p. 158).

8 See Proulx (2006, pp. 102–10), who identifies variations and changes in the depiction of severed heads over time.

9 In mid to late Nasca times (N5 and after) imagery indicates an increasing emphasis on head taking in militaristic contexts (Browne et al. 1993, p. 290; Roark 1965, p. 54).

[10] See Cajete (2000), who writes powerfully about the ways relational and holistic Indigenous knowledges contrast with Euro-Western science and its tendency to divide and objectify; see also Fixico (2003).

[11] The biological sex of dressed human beings is not always readily distinguishable; for discussion of the representation of males and females, as well as their typical activities in Nasca visual culture, see Proulx (2006, pp. 194–96).

[12] Because Andean cultures—including those on south-coastal Peru—maintained connections with the Amazonian lowlands for millennia, drawing on the ethnographic literature from the Amazon for possible cultural, ideological, or ontological insights is not altogether unreasonable.

[13] Although Viveiros de Castro's research focuses on Amazonian peoples, he employs the term Amerindian to suggest that perspectivism is practiced far beyond Amazonia. Some conclude that perspectivism may be limited to hunting peoples (Fausto 2007, p. 523), but many North American Indigenous thinkers have written about closely aligned concepts as part of relational ontologies that are not necessarily associated with hunting. See, for example, Cajete (2000), Kimmerer (2013), Watts (2013), and Wilson (2008).

[14] A future article will discuss the tendency of scholars to rely on religion and ritual to explain the material and visual cultures of the Andean south coast and other Indigenous peoples who are known primarily through archaeology.

[15] Considerable effort has been expended on identifying the source of the nose-ornament form. Carmichael (2016, pp. 63–64) discusses the available pictorial evidence, as well as previous interpretations, concluding that the ornament is a combination of coypu (*Myocastor coypus*, a large semi-aquatic rodent also known as a river otter or nutria) and pampas cat characteristics. The key difference for Carmichael and others is the orientation of the whiskers: those of the coypu are described as upswept, while horizontal whiskers correspond to the pampas cat. Yet, the difference between upswept and horizontal is, in reality, negligible. Indeed, Carmichael (ibid., p. 64) notes that felines, identifiable by their distinctive pelts, are depicted with upswept whiskers; he also notes that the "Nasca propensity to mix creature parts makes it unlikely we can ever be certain of a single derivation." Given the fact that pampas cats are more frequently depicted in early south-coastal imagery than coypu, suggests that the feline is the iconographical referent for Paracas and Nasca nose ornaments (Proulx 2006, p. 146).

[16] One of Proulx's (2006, pp. 78–79) variations, called the Step-Masked Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, lacks the whiskered nose ornament that typifies other Anthropomorphic Mythical Beings and also does not always have readily identifiable zoomorphic features. Classifying it with the other Anthropomorphic Mythical Beings complicates the category.

[17] While I have reservations about using terms, such as harpy, derived from Greek mythology to name Nasca entities, thorough discussion is beyond the scope of this study.

[18] In his section on supernatural or sacred themes in Nasca art, Proulx (2006, pp. 62–115) includes additional named beings. These include basically anthropomorphic entities (the Harvester [pp. 91–94], the Hunter [pp. 96–97], and the Jagged-Staff God [pp. 97–98]), as well as the Mythical Spotted Cat (pp. 88–91), which occasionally has the eye markings of falcons but is otherwise feline, and the Mythical Monkey (pp. 98–102), which is consistently simian.

[19] Like human beings, culpeo have a flexible diet. While their preferred food is meat, when needs must they consume fruits, berries, and the seed pods of the huarango tree, enabling them not only to survive in the arid south coast but thrive.

[20] Prehensile feet on anthropomorphs largely disappear after N2 (Carmichael 2016, p. 63), but monkeys continue to be a subject of Nasca ceramicists, peaking in N7 (Proulx 2006, pp. 142–43).

[21] Frame's larger argument is that Paracas Necropolis embroideries in block-color style illustrate the transformation of the newly deceased to mature ancestorhood, which includes taking on both plant and predatory animal attributes. Frame's maturing ancestor interpretation is appealing, but it does not account for (and was not intended to address) the full range of south-coastal meta-predators from Paracas through Nasca periods.

[22] The literature on early Andean disarticulated head imagery, as well as head taking and curating, is vast. For excellent summaries of the scholarship on this topic, see Conlee (2007), DeLeonardis (2012), and Proulx (2006, pp. 102–10; 2010).

[23] That heads were taken by force is suggested by the bloody batons or clubs held by some composite entities. Most of the heads are those of men and analysis indicates that they were inhabitants of the south coast, suggesting that conflict was mostly restricted to the Nasca. Some of the curated heads could have been ancestral skulls. For more on origins of heads, see Knudson et al. (2008).

[24] Proulx (2006, pp. 68–69) names these consumers "Trophy-Head Tasters" and identifies "tasting" as an attribute of Anthropomorphic Mythical Beings. He indicates that the Taster first appears in Proto-Nasca imagery and disappears after Nasca Phase 5 (ibid., p. 69).

[25] Centuries after the height of Nasca civilization the Inka consumed maize beer from the skull of their enemies as a way of absorbing the opponents' power into the Inka body politic. There is no evidence that the Nasca literally did the same, but consumption from head jars would have been metaphorically similar (as it was when the Inka drank from head-shaped beakers).

[26] Stylistically, the jar corresponds to middle Nasca (phase N5). It had been used prior to burial and so was not produced as a head replacement. See Conlee (2007) for a thorough discussion of the finds at La Tiza, as well as a consideration of two other headless bodies found with "head vessels" in the Nasca area.

[27] Although Frame (2001) does not recognize the role of plants as "takers" in Paracas Necropolis textiles, her recognition of composite predators as generating plant life is aligned with the interpretation presented here.

References

Allen, Catherine J. 1982. Body and Soul in Quechua Thought. *Journal of Latin American Lore* 8: 179–95.

Allen, Catherine J. 1988. *The Hold Life Has: Coca and Cultural Identity in an Andean Community*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Arnold, Denise Y. 2018. Making Textiles into Persons: Gestural Sequences and Relationality in Communities of Weaving Practice of the South Central Andes. *Journal of Material Culture* 23: 239–60. [CrossRef]

Arnold, Denise Y., and Christine Hastorf. 2008. *Heads of State: Icons, Power, and Politics in the Ancient and Modern Andes*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

Arnold, Denise Y., and Juan de Dios Yapita. 2013. *The Metamorphosis of Heads: Textual Struggles, Education, and Land in the Andes*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Bastien, Joseph W. 1978. *Mountain of the Condor: Metaphor and Ritual in an Andean Ayllu*. St. Paul: West Publishing.

Beresford-Jones, David. 2011. *The Lost Woodlands of Ancient Nasca: A Case-Study in Ecological and Cultural Collapse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beresford-Jones, David, and Oliver Q. Whaley. 2021. Nasca Domestic Culture: The Significance of Past Environments for Reading the Material Culture of the South Coast of Peru. *Ñawpa Pacha* 42: 163–83. [CrossRef]

Browne, David M., Helaine Silverman, and Ruben García. 1993. A Cache of 48 Nasca Trophy Heads from Cerro Carapo, Peru. *Latin American Antiquity* 4: 274–94. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Cajete, Gregory. 2000. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe: Clear Light.

Carmichael, Patrick H. 1994. The Life from Death Continuum in Nasca Imagery. *Andean Past* 4: 81–90.

Carmichael, Patrick H. 2015. Proto-Nasca Art and Antaras. *Ñawpa Pacha* 35: 117–72. [CrossRef]

Carmichael, Patrick H. 2016. Nasca Origins and Paracas Progenitors. *Ñawpa Pacha* 36: 53–94. [CrossRef]

Carmichael, Patrick H. 2019. Stages, Periods, Epochs, and Phases in Paracas and Nasca Chronology: Another Look at John Rowe's Ica Valley Master Sequence. *Ñawpa Pacha* 39: 145–79. [CrossRef]

Carmichael, Patrick H., Brenda V. Kennedy, and Lauren Cadwallader. 2014. Coastal but not Littoral: Marine Resources in Nasca Diet. *Ñawpa Pacha* 34: 3–26. [CrossRef]

Cieza de León, Pedro de. 1553. *Primera Parte de la Crónica del Perú*. Sevilla: Martín de Montesdoca.

Conlee, Christina A. 2007. Decapitation and Rebirth: A Headless Burial from Nasca, Peru. *Current Anthropology* 48: 438–45. [CrossRef]

Conlee, Christina A., Daniel A. Contreras, Ann H. Peters, and Kevin J. Vaughn. 2024. Reconsidering Chronologies and Cultural Change on the South Coast of Peru: A Compilation and Analysis of Radiocarbon Dates from Nasca, Ica, and Paracas. *Quaternary International* 703: 97–111. [CrossRef]

Dean, Carolyn. 2025. *Inside Abstraction: Interpreting Inka Visual Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Dean, Carolyn. 2026. Material Witnesses: The Matter of Presence in Inka Visual Culture. In *Indigenous Visual Cultures in Latin America: Seeing, Being, and Meaning*. Edited by Tamara L. Bray and Carolyn Dean. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 43–65.

DeLeonardis, Lisa. 2012. Interpreting the Paracas Body and its Value in Ancient Peru. In *The Construction of Value in the Ancient World*. Edited by John K. Papadopoulos and Gary Urton. Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press at UCLA, pp. 197–217.

Fausto, Carlos. 2007. Feasting on People: Eating Animals and Humans in Amazonia. *Current Anthropology* 48: 497–530. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Fausto, Carlos. 2020. *Art Effects: Image, Agency, and Ritual in Amazonia*. Translated by David Rodgers. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Fixico, Donald. 2003. *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World*. Milton Park: Routledge.

Frame, Mary. 1995. *Ancient Peruvian Mantles: 300 B.C.-A.D. 300*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Frame, Mary. 2001. Blood, Fertility, and Transformation: Interwoven Themes in the Paracas Necropolis Embroideries. In *Ritual Sacrifice in Ancient Peru*. Edited by Elizabeth P. Benson and Anita G. Cook. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 55–92.

González Holguín, Diego. 1608. *Vocabulario de la Lengua General de todo el Peru Llamada Lengua Qquichua, o del Inca*. Lima: Francisco del Canto.

Jiménez, Jaime E., and Andrés J. Novaro. 2004. Pseudalopex culpaeus. In *Canids: Foxes, Wolves, Jackals and Dogs; Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*. Edited by Claudio Sillero-Zubiri, Michael Hoffmann and David W. Macdonald. Gland and Cambridge: International Union for Conservation of Nature, pp. 44–49.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed.

Knudson, Kelly J., Sloan R. Williams, Rebecca Osborn, Kathleen Forgey, and Patrick Ryan Williams. 2008. The Geographic Origins of Nasca Trophy Heads Using Strontium, Oxygen, and Carbon Isotope Data. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 28: 244–57. [CrossRef]

Nieves, Ana. 2009. More Than Meets the Eye: A Study of Two Nasca Motifs. *Andean Past* 9: 229–47.
Nieves, Ana. 2023. Pots, Petroglyphs, and Pathways: The Mythical Killer Whale in Nasca Art. In *Perspectives on Place*. Edited by Elizabeth McGoey and Jeanne Marrie Teutonico. Chicago: The Art Institute. [CrossRef]
Paul, Anne. 1992. Paracas Necropolis Textiles: Symbolic Visions of Coastal Peru. In *The Ancient Americas: Art from Sacred Landscapes*. Edited by Richard F. Townsend. Chicago: The Art Institute, pp. 279–89.
Peters, Ann H. 1991. Ecology and Society in Embroidered Images from the Paracas Necrópolis. In *Paracas Art & Architecture: Object and Context in South Coastal Peru*. Edited by Anne Paul. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, pp. 240–314.
Proulx, Donald A. 2006. *A Sourcebook of Nasca Ceramic Iconography: Reading a Culture Through Its Art*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
Proulx, Donald A. 2010. Curacas y guerreros en la costa sur del Perú. In *Señores de los Imperios del Sol*. Edited by Krzysztof Makowski. Colección Arte y Tesoros del Perú. Lima: Banco de Crédito, pp. 18–37.
Roark, Richard Paul. 1965. From Monumental to Proliferous in Nasca Pottery. *Ñawpa Pacha* 3: 1–92, 135. [CrossRef]
Silverman, Helaine. 2002. *Ancient Nasca Settlement and Society*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
Townsend, Richard. 1985. Deciphering the Nazca World: Ceramic Images from Ancient Peru. *Museum Studies (Art Institute of Chicago)* 11: 116–39. [CrossRef]
Vaughn, Kevin J., Jelmer W. Eerkens, Carl Lipo, Sachiko Sakai, and Katharina Schreiber. 2014. It's About Time? Testing the Dawson Ceramic Seriation Using Luminescence Dating, Southern Nasca Region, Peru. *Latin American Antiquity* 25: 449–61. [CrossRef]
Vilaça, Aparecida. 2005. Chronically Unstable Bodies: Reflections on Amazonian Corporalities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11: 445–64. [CrossRef]
Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 1998. Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4: 469–88. [CrossRef]
Watts, Vanessa. 2013. Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European Tour!). *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2: 20–34.
Wilson, Shawn. 2008. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Winnipeg: Fernwood.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.