

Archaeological Confirmation of a Moche Ceremony

En 1972, durante las excavaciones en las *huacas* del Sol y de la Luna, el descubrimiento de una tumba Moche confirmó la realización de la ceremonia Moche del “badminton”, descrita por Gerdt Kutscher, en 1958, a partir del análisis iconográfico de cerámica Mochica, la cual era ejecutada por individuos de la clase alta en las inmediaciones de una *huaca*, o en la cima de ella. La comparación entre los elementos iconográficos y la información proveída por la excavación arqueológica: contenido de la tumba y contexto del hallazgo, revelan un camino confiable para la interpretación de la cultura Moche.

Among the many contributions that Gerdt Kutscher made to the study of Moche iconography was the identification of an activity which he termed ceremonial “badminton”. In a report published in 1958 he provided rollout drawings (Figs. 1 – 3) and detailed descriptions of three representations of this activity. He also identified the objects used by the individuals engaged in this ceremony and made some interesting observations about the interpretation of these scenes. In comparison with some of his major studies of Moche iconography, this was a minor publication. Nevertheless, it proved to be a valuable reference. When a Moche tomb was excavated in 1972, it was apparent that certain objects in that tomb could be understood only with reference to Kutscher’s publication and that the associated artifacts substantiated his original hypotheses. This correlation



between archaeological evidence and iconographic research graphically demonstrates the remarkable insight that characterizes Kutscher's work with the pictorial record of pre-Columbian civilizations, and it seems appropriate to summarize the results of these investigations here.

One of the most significant portions of Kutscher's original article dealt with a detailed discussion of the paraphernalia used in the "badminton" ceremony; namely, a throwing stick, a staff, and a long string with a flower-like object attached to one end and a small peg attached to the other. The drawings show that when this equipment was in use the string was wrapped around the staff and the throwing stick was used to hurl the staff into the air. As the staff flew up, the string uncoiled, and the flower-like object floated to the ground with the small peg acting as a counterweight. Kutscher suggested that the flower-like object consisted of feathers radiating from a lightweight disc and that it was, therefore, analogous to a badminton shuttlecock. He was, however, somewhat puzzled by the construction of the long staff. Although the staff is consistently depicted with short crosspieces at each end, there is nothing to indicate what the function of these crosspieces may have been. Kutscher observed that in one of the representations (Fig. 3) the crosspieces appear to be made of thin sticks tied together, but he also realized that if one assumed "... that the sticks of the cross were not firmly tied to the spear, but were mobility mounted, then the crosses may, possibly have rotated in flight like propellers" (Kutscher 1958: 428)

In his analysis, Kutscher also noted that a number of different individuals are shown taking part in the ceremony. Most of the participants are richly clad, and are often depicted standing on top of a stepped platform. A few plainly dressed individuals appear to act as attendants, for they are shown handing staffs to the major figures. Anthropomorphized birds, foxes, felines, deer and iguanas sometimes play a major role in these scenes, and in a few instances the principal figure is portrayed with a fanged mouth. These facts led Kutscher to formulate three hypotheses. He felt that the presence of the stepped platform indicated that the ceremony had taken place on or near the summit of a large pyramid mound; that the elaborately dressed individuals were members of the Moche upper class; and that these depictions were not simply illustrations of a mythical scene, but representations of a ceremony actually conducted by the Moche people. The fact that some of the participants appeared to be supernatural beings might, he suggested, be due to the belief that existed among the native people in this region that demons in visible form took part in the dances, drinking bouts, and festivals of mortals.

By very carefully noting minor details in the various representations of the ceremony, Kutscher was also able to suggest a connection between

ceremonial “badminton” and the ritual races shown in Moche art. He observed, for example, that several of the smaller figures (Figs. 1 and 2) are holding folded pouches of cloth or leather which are a standard part of the runner’s equipment in racing scenes, and that the owl demon with a whip (Fig. 3) is a character often portrayed in depictions of ritual races (Fig. 4).

Kutscher anticipated that additional paintings of the “badminton” ceremony could be found in other collections, and that these might provide additional information about the ritual. In the past few years we have developed a large photographic archive of Moche art, and an examination of this archive has yielded five additional examples, one of which is illustrated in figure 5. Although these examples reveal a few minor details not shown in the three representations originally published by Kutscher, they do not significantly alter his analysis of the essential features. On the contrary, they verify, in almost every instance, the conclusions reached in the original study. The most graphic confirmation of Kutscher’s observations, however, has come from archaeological excavation. In 1972, in the course of a major excavation at the Pyramids at Moche, we uncovered a tomb which substantiated Kutscher’s observations and provided important new information about the “badminton” ceremony.

The Pyramids at Moche have attracted archaeological attention since Max Uhle conducted the first excavation there in 1899 and 1900, and it is likely that these crumbling mounds mark the site of the ancient capital of the Moche kingdom. Today, the site is dominated by two large, man-made pyramid mounds (Figs. 6 and 7). The largest of these, the Pyramid of the Sun, reaches a height of 41 meters, and once covered an area of more than 100,000 square meters. It is made entirely of sun-dried mud bricks, and was built in stages over a period of more than 500 years.

The sister pyramid, the Pyramid of the Moon, is somewhat smaller, and is located at the base of a large hill. Between the two pyramids is a wide plain, filled with architectural remains, deep refuse deposits, and extensive cemeteries.

It was on the open plain, between the two main pyramids, that a set of nine high status Moche burials was found (Fig. 7).¹ The graves were concealed inside a large mud-brick platform more than 2 meters high. Examination showed that the burial cells had not been planned and built during the construction of the platform, but had been cut out of the finished structures at a later time. All nine individuals were adult males between 35 and 55 years of age, and one of them was buried with a staff of the type used in the “badminton” ceremony (Fig. 8). The staff was

1 For a complete description of each of these tombs, see Donnan and Mackey (1978).

lying along the left side of the body. The long pole, measuring approximately 170 centimeters, was made of wood and portions of it were sheathed in metal. Although almost all of the wood had decomposed, it was clear that, originally, short crosspieces had been inserted through holes near each end (Fig. 9). The crosspieces were made of metal and held in place with metal shims. Corrosion of the metal sheathing near the central portion of the staff revealed that cordage had once been wound around it. Unfortunately, even this new evidence did not explain the function of the crosspieces. It is clear, however, that they were rigidly attached to the staff, and would not have rotated during flight. Although it was clear that the staff had been buried with cordage wound around it, neither the flower-like object nor the short peg were found, possibly because they were made of perishable materials.

It is interesting to consider the other objects placed in the tomb along with the staff (Figures 8 – 11). These objects include a pair of copper tweezers (D) and a bent copper spatula (E) near the right pelvis, a bent tumi knife (F) near the feet, a folded piece of copper (wrapped with unspun fiber and spun yarn) in the mouth, and a copper disc bent over the face of the corpse. The copper disc was 20 centimeters in diameter, and had gold flakes on the surface which suggested that it had once been gilded. There were also traces of red pigment on the underside of this disc which may be traces of face-paint worn by the corpse at the time of interment. In this regard, it is interesting to note that most of the individuals engaged in the “badminton” ceremony appear to be wearing face-paint.

Six ceramic vessels were also found in the tomb: a dipper (1), four jars (2 – 5), and a beautifully painted stirrup spout bottle (6). The latter is of particular interest since it depicts a ritual race scene of the type Kutscher suggested was related to the “badminton” ceremony. Spiralling upward around the chamber is a procession of running figures (Fig. 11), each carrying a folded pouch identical to the one Kutscher noted in figures 1 and 2. It may be that the large copper disc covering the face of the individual in this grave was a circular headdress ornament of the type worn by many of the figures depicted on the bottle. The fact that this bottle was found in the grave of an individual buried with a “badminton” staff strongly supports Kutscher’s contention that ritual races and ceremonial “badminton” were closely related. This assertion is also supported by the fact that large discs which could be clearly identified as the circular headdress elements worn by individuals in ritual race scenes were found in several of the other eight associated burials.

Many of Kutscher’s other hypotheses also proved to be correct. The discovery of part of the ceremonial equipment in an archaeological context certainly lends credence to his contention that the “badminton”

ceremony was actually performed in ancient times. The notion that individuals performing the ceremony were members of the Moche upper class is substantiated by the fact that this tomb and the other eight associated with it clearly contained high status burials. These individuals were buried with numerous grave goods, including gilded metal objects, elaborate ceramic vessels, and probably, an array of perishable items which have since decomposed – intricately woven textiles, pyroengraved gourds, carved wood, basketry, and feather objects.

Finally, it is interesting to consider Kutscher's contention that the "badminton" ceremony took place "in the immediate vicinity of one of the great "huacas" (Pyramids) and, indeed, even on top of it ..." (Kutscher 1958: 425). This burial, containing the paraphernalia for the "badminton" ceremony, was located between two of the largest man made pyramid mounds ever constructed in South America. Perhaps this very individual participated in the ceremony, casting the staff with cross pieces skyward from the summit of the Pyramid of the Sun, and then watching the string unwind and float slowly downward over the very spot where he was eventually buried. Today one can stand at the location of the tomb, look up to the summit of the pyramid, and imagine the ceremony as it must have been enacted. The attendants holding clusters of carefully prepared staffs stand to one side. Several of the elaborately dressed marksmen have laid the missiles on their throwing sticks, while one of them, his gaze fixed heavenward, hurls the magic shaft with a sense of profound spiritual ecstasy.

The fact that we can picture this event so clearly is in itself a tribute to Gerdt Kutscher, and to the imagination and scholarship of this truly remarkable man.

REFERENCES

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Fig. 1: Ceremonial
 "badminton" scene
 (after Kutscher
 1958: fig.1).
 Fig. 2: Ceremonial
 "badminton" scene
 (after Kutscher
 1958: fig. 2).



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Fig. 3: Ceremonial "badminton" scene (after Kutscher 1958: fig. 3).
 Fig. 4: Ritual race scene (after Kutscher 1954: 72).



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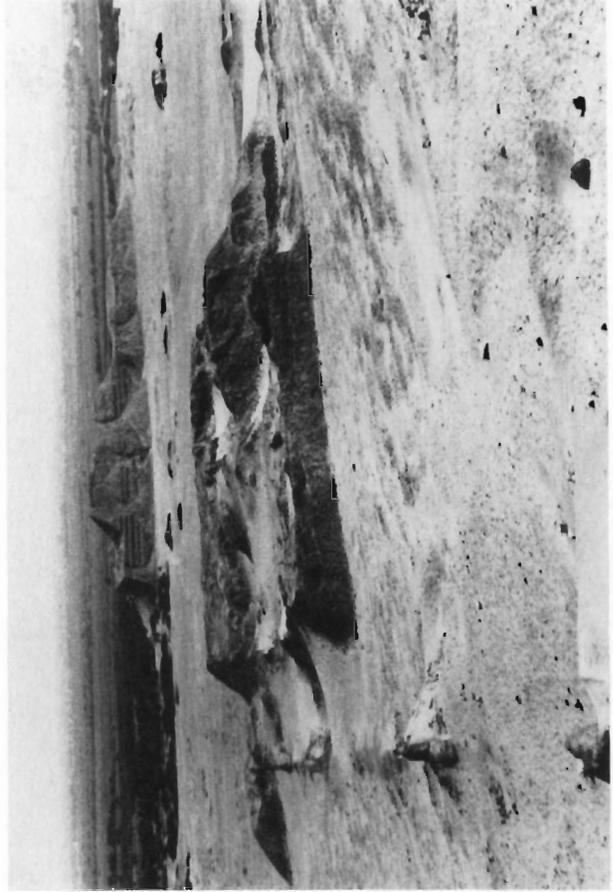


Fig. 5: Ceremonial "badminton" scene (Drawing by Madeline Fang).
 Fig. 6: The Pyramids at Moche with the Pyramid of the Moon in the foreground and the Pyramid of the Sun in the background.

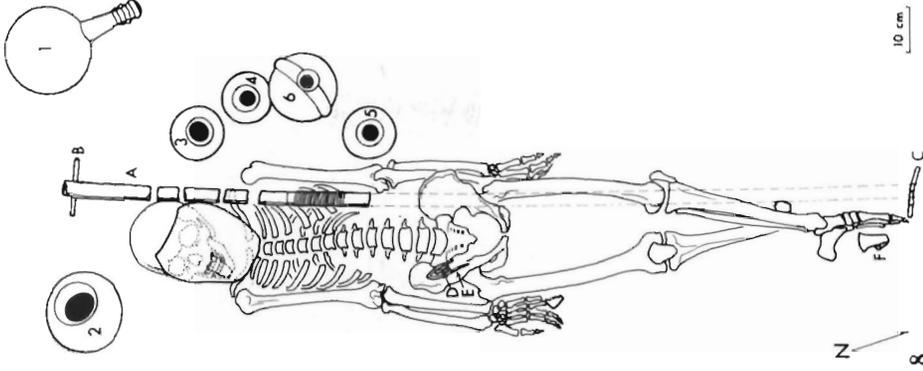
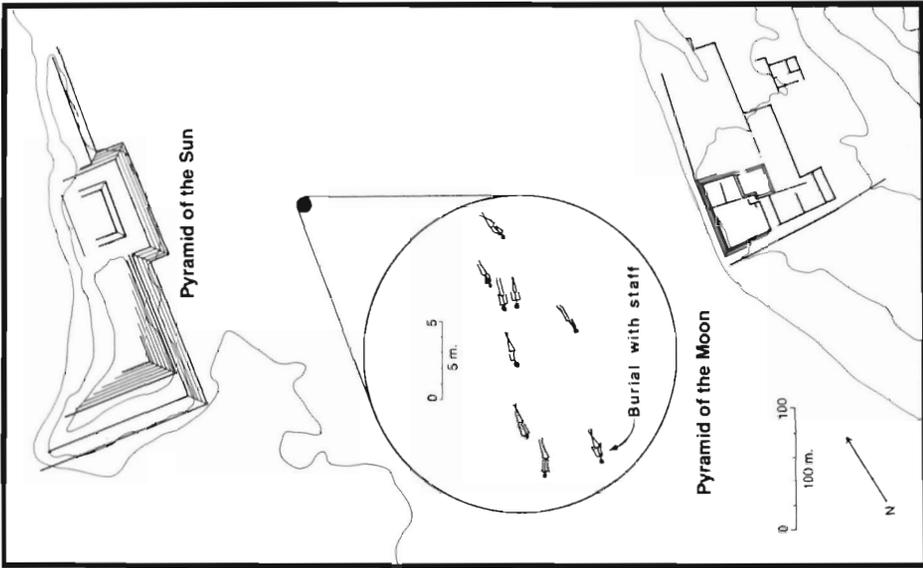


Fig. 7: Map of the Pyramids at Moche with the location of the nine Moche burials. The inset detail shows the relative positions of the nine burials and identifies the one which contained the "badminton" staff.

Fig. 8: Plan view of the burial containing the "badminton" staff.

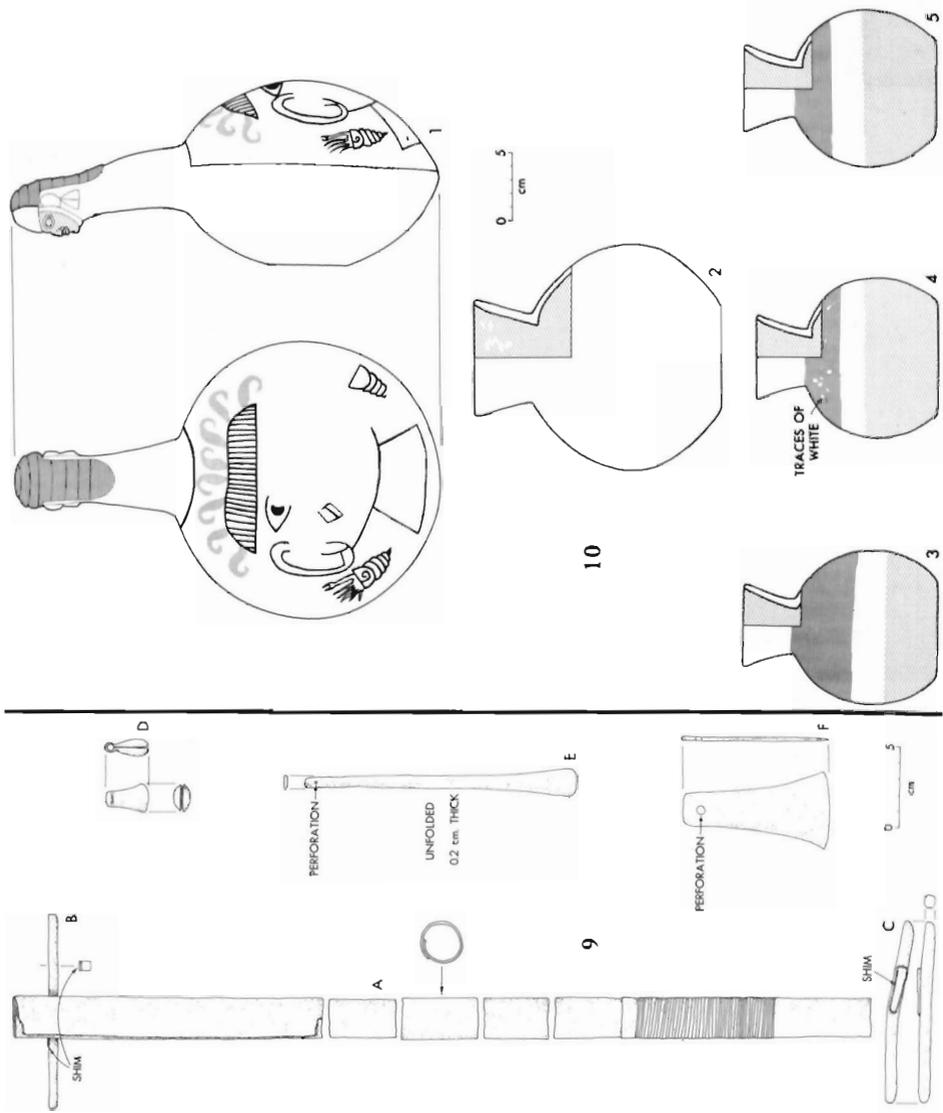


Fig. 9: Metal objects found in the burial containing the "badminton" staff.

Fig. 10: Ceramic objects found in the burial containing the "badminton" staff.

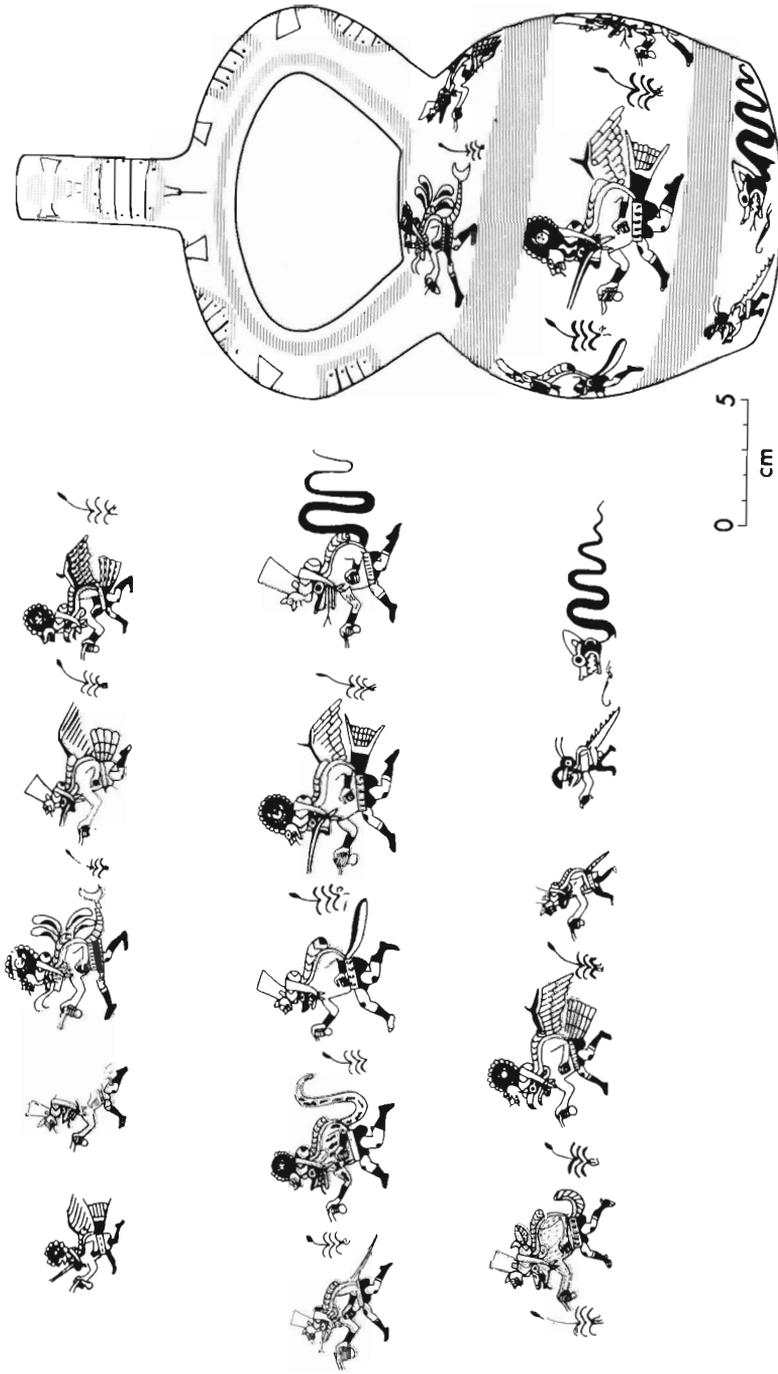


Fig. 11: Bottle from the burial containing the "badminton" staff, with a ritual race scene.

