Partnering with Pots: The Work of Objects in the Imperial Inca Project

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New developments in the natural sciences are contributing to new thinking on the nature of matter, materiality and being. Such re-visioning of the natural world is, in part, responsible for 'the ontological turn', a trend clearly visible in recent archaeological discourse. In combination with evolving relational and symmetrical approaches to investigating the constitution of 'the social', the door is open for exploring logics, taxonomies and understandings of reality different from our own in studies of the past. Applying these ideas to the investigation of early imperialism, this paper offers an analysis of a key element in the repertoire of Inca material culture that forwards the importance of human–thing relations in the context of early state politics. Working from the basis of the imperial Inca ceramic assemblage, the study examines how these objects were deployed in the task of empire-building and what insights they provide into Andean ontological commitments during the late pre-Columbian period. An argument is developed that imperial pots were construed as animate beings and agents of the State. The study brings to the fore the mutually constituted nature of the imperial Inca project and suggests new avenues for future research that highlight the matter of early empires.

New understandings of matter, materiality, agency and connectivity are being driven by new theoretical developments in the realm of the natural sciences—particularly physics, molecular biology and ecology (e.g. Barad 2007; Greene 2010; Jerne 1985). The world of quarks, gluons and Higgs boson is very different from that envisioned by Newtonian physics, while advances in chaos and complexity theory continue to reconfigure our understandings of the world and our relationship to it (e.g. Coole & Frost 2010; Haraway 1989; 2003; Spretnak 2011). As Deleuze has described it, 'science is becoming increasingly event centered (*événementielle*) instead of structural', more rhizomatic than arborescent (Deleuze & Parnet 1987, 67). Such evolving orientations in science are contributing to new philosophical thinking on the nature of being and reality (e.g. Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2010; Hird 2004; Latour 1993; Scott 2002).

The trickle-down effects of these developments are, in part, responsible for what has been termed the ontological turn in the social sciences, a trend that is clearly visible in recent archaeological discourse (e.g. Alberti 2016; Alberti *et al.* 2011; Harris & Robb 2012; Jones 2015; Marshall & Alberti 2014). The ontological turn entails a movement towards a material-semiotics and away from linguistic models of reality that have dominated since the mid twentieth century, e.g. constructivist views that the world exists as a consequence of the way we conceptualize and represent it. As a philosophical stance, the constructivist orientation emphasized epistemology, with knowledge and its verification taking centre stage, while matters of ontology, e.g. questions about how the world is, were largely left unconsidered or on the margins (Pickering 2010, 192; Viveiros de Castro 2004).

The privileging of the linguistic orientation and associated concerns with representation and meaning were defining features of late twentieth-century post-processual archaeology—a key facet of which involved the recasting of material culture as meaningful, symbolic and active (e.g. Hodder 1982a,b; 1985; 1987; Miller & Tilley 1984; Shanks & Tilley 1987).

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While a positive corrective in many respects to the processual archaeology of the 1960s and '70s, the emphasis on the meaning of material culture in the post-processual programme has more recently been critiqued for essentially reinforcing traditional dichotomies of subject/object, mind/matter, culture/nature, and so on (Ingold 2007; Jones & Boivin 2010; Knappett 2005). As it is presently unfolding in archaeology, the ontological turn directs us toward greater concern with the connections between matter and meaning, material agency, the physical nature of materials and the way things shape our lives (Alberti *et al.* 2013; Bauer & Kosiba 2016; Boivin 2008; Bray 2009; Chapman & Wylie 2015; Conneller 2011; Ingold 2000; Olsen 2003; Watts 2013).

Aligning with these concerns, I employ a material-semiotic approach in this paper that foregrounds recognition that social reality comprises a heterogeneous mix of human and non-human actors (including objects, animals, places, texts, technologies, symbols, etc.) enmeshed in networks of relations that are stabilized only through continual enactment (Barad 2003; Deleuze & Parnet 1987; Haraway 1991; 1992; Latour 1993). Within this framework, consideration of ontology, materiality and action are central, as is performativity. Given these commitments, social reality is understood to exist not in the abstract or in theory, but rather as an effect or outcome of ongoing inter/intra-action among actors (Barad 2003; Deleuze & Parnet 1987; Latour 1993; Law 2007). Working with this remit, I explore here how 'power' was enacted-into-being in the context of the late pre-Columbian Andes and trace the networks of actors involved. Specifically, I am interested in mapping the *effect* we label 'the Inca Empire', with the attendant forms of locally-constituted power that underwrote this construct, from a material-semiotic standpoint that allows for multiple and heterogeneous players entangled in multiple and various ways.

As constituents of past collectives comprising both humans and non-humans, archaeological remains afford entry into the social worlds they helped assemble and within which they once operated. In exploring the past, it is important to stick close to our evidentiary base, e.g. the materials and contextual associations comprising the archaeological record, rather than making *a priori* assumptions about the world of ancient peoples derived from a western perspective or, conversely, uncritically adopted from contemporary ethnographies. Just as the particular ontology of western capitalism is potentially legible through the study of fracking equipment, strip-mining operations and industrial farming facilities, so, too, I contend, would be the ontological commitments of the Inca via the study of their material culture, their architecture, settlement patterns, infrastructure, and so on. Admitting and attending to the non-human members of society, the unique assemblies of things, what is and is not included in such coalitions, the treatments accorded different elements, the actions that occurred in proximity and the myriad threads of entanglement, offers archaeology special purchase on the assembling of the social in other times and places.

This study works from the empirical basis of a specific category of Inca material culture, the imperial state ceramic assemblage, to consider how such objects may have been deployed in the task of empire-building, how they worked to shape imperial subjects and subjectivities and what insights they might provide into the social realities they helped to enact during the late pre-Columbian era (*c.* AD 1400–1532). The approach is one that attends closely to the materiality of these objects and what is discernible about their relations within broader social networks through contextual information. Inca pottery is but one among many categories of material culture that could similarly be analysed as 'ancient comrades' in articulating the political project of the Cuzqueños, both constructing and expressing Inca understandings of how the world was and how it might be further made. My choice of focus here stems from the apparent emphasis placed on this particular class of objects by the Inca themselves as evidenced by these vessels' widespread distribution, high degree of standardization and aesthetic investment.

In addition to seeking insight into the political project and ontological commitments of the Inca, I also investigate the notion that the imperial ceramic assemblage worked as a material-semiotic 'technology of power' coordinated by state authorities, realized by state potters, and acting upon imperial subjects in varying ways. Along these lines, I first consider the significance of Inca vessels as containers and the critical role these played in creating the notion of imperial Inca rule and sacred kingship. My argument is that imperial vessels materially created and enacted the concept of king as much as the fleshly person of the king gave meaning to the clay pots comprising the imperial assemblage, with this entanglement giving rise to new social orders. The physical qualities of containers, as various scholars have observed, materialize notions of inside/outside, openings and closures, boundaries, surfaces, filling up, pouring out, storing and dispensing (Knappett *et al.* 2010; Warnier 2006). My claim is that these materially constituted concepts were key to the construction of Inca kingship and power—as indicated

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Figure 1. *(Colour online) The 14 vessel shape categories comprising the imperial Inca assemblage. Form 1:* aríbalo*; Forms 2–5: narrow-necked jars; Forms 6–7: wide-necked jars; Forms 8–11: wide-mouthed pots, one of which has a pedestal base (Form 10); Forms 12–13: plates; Form 14:* q'ero. *(Photographs: T. Bray.)*

by the lords of Cuzco's clear decision to 'partner with pots'.

Following a number of ideas outlined by Jean-Pierre Warnier in his ethnographic study of sacred kingship in West Africa (2007), the focus here is on the relationship between the body, bodily techniques, sensory perceptions, materials and material forms in the analysis of the Inca ceramic assemblage, emphasizing the symmetrical affects between people and things in the context of material practice. As suggested above, rather than viewing classic Inca pottery as an invention after-the-fact of Cuzqueño ascendancy, I approach it as an important *co-creator* of imperial authority and rule. I suggest that critical insight into *how* state vessels helped to construct and instantiate the idea of kingship in the late pre-Columbian Andes is discernible in the assembly of materials, symbols, forms and affordances comprising the Inca ceramic ensemble.

Imperial Inca ceramic assemblage

I turn now to the imperial Inca ceramic assemblage, which consists of a limited number of distinctive and highly standardized vessel forms. The contours of this assemblage and the decorative treatments that characterized Inca pottery have been described in a series of previous publications (Bray 2000; 2003; 2008). Here the most salient features of the state ceramic repertoire are summarized for purposes of the present discussion.

Following the classification scheme devised by the German archaeologist Albert Meyers (1975), Inca pottery can be divided into 14 vessel categories (Figure 1). These include the *aríbalo* [amphora]; four varieties of narrow-necked jars; two types of wide-necked jars; four wide-mouthed pots, one of which has a distinctive pedestal base (Form 10); two varieties of plate forms; and one tumbler-shaped cup form

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known as a *q'ero*. With the exception of the Form 10 pedestal-base pot and the much less common Form 9 *olla*, both of which were likely involved in the cooking or re-heating of foodstuffs, most of the imperial assemblage appears designed for serving, eating and display. In other words, the state wares seem intended for 'front stage' type functions in the context of special commensal events—which these vessels themselves undoubtedly helped define as extra-ordinary. Imperial state wares are found in high frequencies at important Inca centres such as Cuzco (Valcárcel 1934; 1935), Huánuco Pampa (Morris & Thompson 1985), Hatún Xauxa (D'Altroy 1981), Tomebamba (Idrovo 2000), etc., typically in association with central plazas and other zones of ritual activity. The amount of labour invested in their aesthetic appeal, as well as the contextual data, suggest that they were key players in the network of actors comprising state-sponsored feasting events.

The polychrome imagery that characterized Inca state pottery has traditionally been described as abstract, geometric and generally devoid of panache (e.g. Kroeber 1952, 293–4; Mason 1957, 231; Willey 1948, 11). Kroeber (1952, 293–4), for instance, referred to Inca ceramics as 'deficient in imagination and ambitions or objectives other than technical ones', while Willey (1948, 11) observed that Inca iconography was generally 'ornamental and trivial rather than emblematic and compelling'. To suggest, however, that the Inca state aesthetic was meaningless or trivial is entirely counter-intuitive—even more so in the context of an imperial state that lacked a conventional writing system. Here I analyse the motifs and structures comprising the design system of imperial Inca pottery, as well as the vessels themselves, as important elements in the material-semiotic construction and enactment of state power.

Pots and bodies

Ethnographically and archaeologically, there is ample evidence to suggest that ceramic vessels and human bodies have long been symmetrically and indexically intertwined (Barley 1994; David *et al.* 1988; Herbert 1993; Lévi-Strauss 1988; Welbourn 1984; 1989). In the Andes, the explicit anthropomorphization of pottery vessels is observed in many pre-Columbian cultures, ranging from the Moche with their spectacular portrait vessels (Donnan 1978; 1992), to the distinctive funerary urns of various Amazonian groups (Evans & Meggers 1968; Nordenskiöld 1924; 1930), to the various anthropomorphic cup and jar forms found in domestic contexts in the northern Andes (Jijón y Caamaño 1927; Labbé 1986). With respect to the Huari and Tiahuanaco, the imperial predecessors of the Inca, this tendency was specifically expressed in anthropomorphic effigy vessels and over-sized jars and urns associated with the storage and serving of *chicha* (see Goldstein 2003; Isbell & Cook 1987).

The pottery of the imperial Inca state is stylistically distinct from all previous Andean ceramic traditions—practically speaking, there is no mistaking it for anything other than Inca. Eschewing the representational forms and imagery favoured by their predecessors, the Inca created a strikingly formalized, and formulaic, style. Nonetheless, I wish to argue that the symmetrical indexicality between pottery vessels and human bodies evident in many earlier Andean traditions actually continued with the Inca, though it was expressed in a distinct manner. Such a difference in approach to the creation of state wares may well have been part of an evolving material-semiotics of power relating to the entanglement of new peoples, places, things and ideas.

For the Cuzqueños, as well as many other Andean peoples, the structures and processes that governed the human body were understood to be the basic organizing principles of the social and physical worlds (Classen 1993; Sherbondy 1982). As indicated in Inca origin myths, in state rituals relating to the health of the ruler, in the mummification of dead kings, etc., the body of the Inca lord, or the Sapa Inca, was of paramount concern to the state. I suggest that imperial pottery played a key role in creating the material meaning of the kingly body (as well as *vice versa*) and that this proposed relationship of symmetrical indexicality provides a point of entry for unpacking the significance of the iconographic design system that characterized the state assemblage. The iconography, in turn, provides further insight into the material enactment of power and kingship in the late pre-Columbian Andes.

Inca vessel forms

There are only a few forms in the imperial assemblage that suggest a direct linkage between ceramic pots and the human body. The most obvious is the flat-bottomed, tall-necked jar with the single vertical strap handle (Form 3). This vessel typically has a modelled face on the neck consisting of two 'coffee bean' eyes, a vertical nose, a facial tattoo and pursed lips (Fig. 2). It is the only vessel in the imperial assemblage that offers such an unambiguous reference to the human body as part of its standard composition. A limited number of other imperial forms more rarely incorporate explicit bodily elements into their morphology. These include *aríbalos*, which are occasionally found

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Figure 2. *(Colour online) Guano, Ecuador. 25 cm h., private collection. (Photograph: T. Bray.)*



Figure 3. *(Colour online) Drawing of first Inca king, Manco Capac, indicating the standard male garb, including the V-neck tunic (*unku*), the cape (*yacolla*), sandals (*usuta*) and the wrapped headgear, including the royal fringe (*mascaipacha*) located at the centre of the forehead. (Guaman Poma 1936 [1613], 86.)*

with modelled visages on the necks as well as modelled arms or penises on the lower portion of the vessel body; pedestal-base pots, which often exhibit a pair of protuberances suggestive of breasts on the upper body opposite the handle; and a small number of shallow plates equipped with handles modelled in the form of human heads or penises. Other provocative examples of the pot–body linkage in the imperial assemblage are seen in two rare museum pieces, each of which involve a medium-sized *aríbalo* carrying a smaller one on its back in the manner in which people traditionally transported these jars (see Bray 2008, 125, fig. 7.2). These pottery 'puns' offer further support for the idea that both artisans and citizens of the Empire construed Inca vessels as person-like, animate entities.

The case for Inca pots as bodies of the specifically imperial kind can be made by focusing on the most common forms of imagery employed in the embellishment of these vessels. Such imagery may be understood as an important material component of an emergent technology of power in its own right. In the Andes, the essence of personhood was visually and materially manifest through the donning of clothing. As some of the earliest expositors of Andean culture noted, clothing was seen as an integral component of a person's bodily and social existence (Betanzos 1996 [1557], 13–14; Murra 1962). Even today, cloth and garments are viewed as the embodiment of well-being, as symbols of status and identity and as repositories of fundamental ideas about the world and the cosmos (e.g. Phipps 2004; Rowe & Cohen 2002).

That personhood may have been attributed to non-human entities and communicated through the use of clothing is suggested by various observations on native Andean practices. Early extirpators of idolatries, for instance, reported numerous discoveries

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of unmodified stones dressed in fine garments—in at least one instance, 'in the manner of an Indian' (Albornoz 1967 [1582], 28, 37; see also Avila 1918 [1645], 69–70; Polo de Ondegardo [1584], cited in MacCormack 1991, 179–80). The continuation of such practice has been documented as recently as the late 1980s in Bolivia, where the veneration of an upright stone outfitted with a man's poncho, hat and *chuspa* [coca bag] was photo-documented by Johan Reinhard (in Phipps 2004, 34). Archaeologically we have evidence for the 'clothing' of Inca buildings via the application of painted design (Bonavia 1985, 153; Gisbert *et al*. 1996). Other objects found to have been literally dressed in the early Colonial period—all of which were clearly venerated (e.g. understood as *wak'as*)—included trees (Albornoz [1582] 1967, 26); carved sticks intended as firewood (Cobo 1990 [1653], 65, 117); ears of corn, as well as bundled sheaves (Polo de Ondegardo [1584], cited in MacCormack 1991, 179); *conopas* (small animal effigies) (Arriaga 1968 [1621], 22–32; Karsten 1949, 202–4); and, interestingly, ceramic pots.

Reports from the seventeenth century indicate that various ethnic groups in the Andean region had conserved certain vessels from the prehispanic era that they continued secretly to worship as founding ancestors (Duviols 1986, 325–45; Polia 1999 [1662–64], 502–5). Numerous witnesses reported that these vessels were finely dressed in women's garb. For example, the vessel associated with the Cotos lineage in Cajatambo, which was called Coya Huarmi ['Queen Woman' in Quechua], was said to have been richly outfitted with earrings, necklaces, *tupu* pins, belts, dresses, shawls and sandals, according to various informants (Duviols 1986, 337), while another vessel associated with the Tamborga lineage, called Llanca Anaco Losa Guaman, was reportedly clothed in a llama pelt (Duviols 1986, 345; Polia 1999 [1662–64], 504).

Inca iconography

The apparently widespread practice of the dressing of objects in gender-specific clothing provides an important interpretive bridge for analysing the material-semiotics of imperial Inca pottery and iconography, as well as insights into native Andean ontology. Historic precedent, e.g. the clearly indicated gender of Huari, Tiahuanaco and Chimu effigy vessels, as well as the few explicit references noted within the Inca corpus, e.g. the occasional appearance of Inca pots with penises (see, for instance, Bray 2000, 175, fig. 7), point to the symmetrically indexical relationship between imperial vessels and the male, rather than the female, body. The subsequent analysis will therefore focus on the clothing of elite males.

The dress of elite Inca males, as well as the king himself, was essentially the same as that of all Andean men of the late pre-Columbian era. The standard outfit consisted of a breechcloth (*wara*), a tunic (*unku*), a cape (*yakolla*), sandals (*usuta*), and a headband (*llautu*) (Fig. 3). The principal garment in this general ensemble was the *unku*. As various scholars have noted, the main zones of decorative elaboration on the *unku* were the neck area, the waist and the borders (Dean 1999, 125; Pillsbury 2002, 73; Rowe 1946, 234).

The zones of embellishment on *unkus* correspond to the same principal areas of design observed on Inca vessels, i.e. the neck of the vessel, the front panel—particularly the equator (or waist) and the borders or edges of the front panel (Fig. 4). This general partitioning of surface area is especially notable on the *aríbalo*, though it is also evident on many other vessel categories as well. For instance, nearly half of the decorated narrow-necked jars (Forms 3, 4 & 5) in my sample of approximately 4000 Inca vessels and the flat-bottomed bowl (Form 11) utilize this structure, as well as approximately one-third of the wide-necked jars (Forms 6 & 7) and nearly all of the decorated *q'eros* (Form 14). The producers of Inca pottery clearly recognized these divisions of the ceramic body, defined in large part by the vessel appendages, and generally limited the application of polychrome decoration to these zones.

Previous studies of Inca clothing have identified a set of standardized design formats associated with male tunics (Pillsbury 2002; Rowe 1979; Zuidema 1991). One of the most common involved the use of a decorative waistband located in the mid-section of the garment as seen in Figure 4b (Rowe 1979, 251–7; Rowe 1992, 5), a feature that Zuidema (1991, 156, 177) suggested was characteristic of royal tunics. The design elements that typically filled the interior of the waistbands on these garments included a single row of concentric diamonds, rows of the small geometric design blocks called *tocapu* (as seen in Figure 4b), or large zigzag lines. Another common design format found on Inca *unkus* involved the use of alternating light and dark squares to create a checkerboard pattern, as well as the general halving or quartering of the front panel of the garment into large solid colour blocks (Matos 1999, 154; Pillsbury 2002, 72; Rowe 1979, 245; Rowe 1992, 8).

Within the database of Inca pottery assembled over the past two decades, 27 per cent (431/1577) of all polychrome decorated bowl and jar forms are embellished with a horizontal band painted across the centre front of the vessel (Fig. 5a). This includes

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Figure 4. *(Colour online) Zones of embellishment on Inca* aríbalos *generally correspond to principal design areas on the Inca* unku: *(left) Form 1 from Machu Picchu, 21 cm h., cat. no. YPM-16415; (right) seventeenth-century painting of Inca and his queen.*



Figure 5. *(Colour online) Common design formats observed on Inca polychrome pottery correlating with design formats noted on Inca tunics: (left)* aríbalo *with horizontal waist band; (centre)* aríbalo *divided into light and dark quadrants; (right)* aríbalo *exhibiting checkerboard pattern in horizontal front panel. (Photographs: T. Bray.)*

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Figure 6. *(Colour online) Inca* aríbalo *with painted design that explicitly references a V-neck* unku *with a horizontal waistband filled with concentric rhomboids with diagonally oriented hourglass motifs in centre. (Museo Jijon y Caamaño, PUCE, Quito, cat. no. 1/659. Photograph: T. Bray.)*

Figure 7. *(Colour online) Inca* aríbalos *exhibiting tripartite design formats: (left) tripartite pattern consisting of vertical front panel with concentric rhombuses flanked on either side by rows of pendant black triangles. (Ethnologische Museum Berlin, cat. no. VA-7893. Photograph: T. Bray); (right) tripartite pattern consisting of vertical front panel with double column of X-&-bar motif flanked by double ramifying stalk motif in side panels. (Ethnologische Museum Berlin, cat. no. VA-7891; Photograph: T. Bray.)*



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22 per cent of *aríbalos* with polychrome design (223/1026); 38 per cent (208/551) of decorated jar and bowl forms, e.g. Forms 3–8, 11 & 12; and 40 per cent of *q'eros* (42/105). This decorative feature corresponds in appearance and placement to the waistbands observed on Inca *unkus*.

There are other design formats on imperial vessels that correlate with the patterns noted on Inca *unkus* as well. For instance, the simple division of vessel bodies into lighter and darker halves along either the vertical or horizontal axis, with the occasional further subdividing into quadrants, is a design structure that accounts for approximately 14 per cent of all decorated vessels the sample, while the use of checkerboard patterning was also noted in a smaller number of cases (Figs 5b & 5c). Other less common decorative treatments observed on Inca vessels draw more explicit connections with the Inca *unku*, as seen in Figure 6.

The general correspondence between design formats and decorative motifs suggests that state potters were purposefully linking the ceramic body of the imperial pot with the fleshy body of the Inca personage (see also Bray 2008). While this relationship is perhaps most evident with Inca *aríbalos*, the utilization of this basic design system across all imperial vessel categories suggests an intent to link a heterogeneous set of human and non-human actors within an aesthetically coherent material universe—one that arguably created a material-semiotic of 'power' operating within the arena of food provisioning and feasting. Recognition of such relationally constituted forms of power is not meant to discount the significance of more coercive or militaristic approaches to dominance, which would have been enacted similarly through different assemblies of human and material agents.

Another very common design format on Inca vessels is the vertically oriented tripartite layout involving a vertical centre band flanked by identical side panels (Fig. 7). This is, in fact, the most common design format found on *aríbalos*, accounting for 38 per cent of all decorated specimens, though it occurs much less frequently on other vessel forms. The vertical centre bands on *aríbalos* exhibiting this design structure are typically either filled with concentric diamonds or have double columns filled with the X-&-bar motif, as seen in Figures 7a and 7b, respectively.

In the many early colonial representations of imperial Inca dress, only a handful depict *unkus* with a vertical centre band—all of which are associated with Pachacuti, the ninth Inca ruler (Fig. 8). The rarity of the vertical design format in Inca clothing may relate to the exclusivity of its associations with this emperor, the one generally credited with expanding Inca dominion and devising the material accoutrements of state. Among his various accomplishments, Pachacuti is attributed with having constructed the noble dynastic history of the 'house of Cuzco' (Julien 2000; Ramirez 2005). Julien (2000) has argued that this would have been a fundamentally self-interested and exclusionary undertaking that entailed the re-working of certain principles of kinship and descent. Considered from a material-semiotic perspective, such an endeavour could not have been a solo effort, but rather would necessarily have



Figure 8. *(Colour online) The ninth Inca ruler, Pachacuti, wearing an* unku *embellished with a column of rhombuses down the centre front of the garment; note that rhombuses contain both quincunx and checkerboard fill patterns. (From Murúa 1962 [1590].)*

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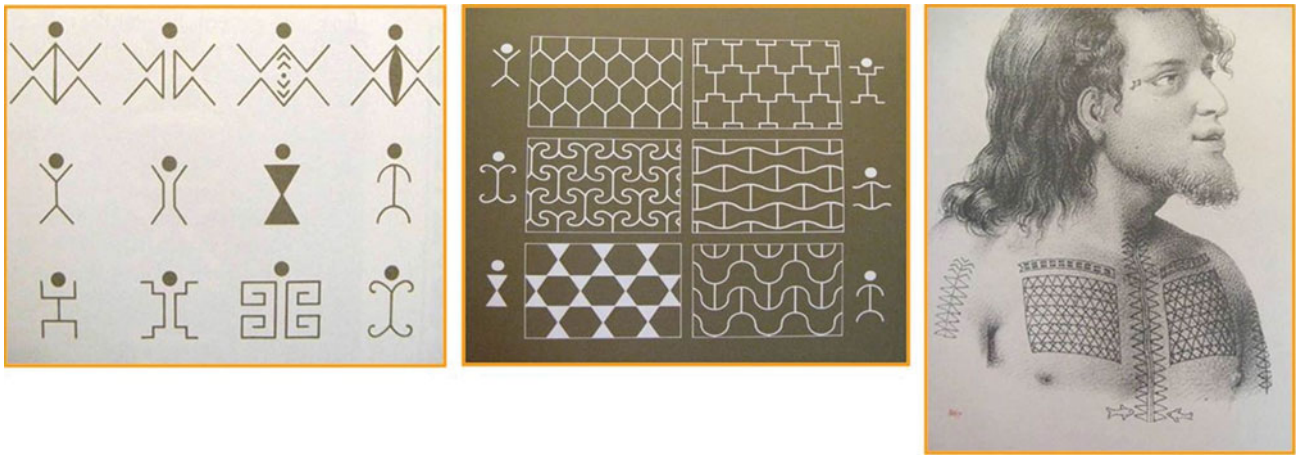


Figure 9. *(Colour online) Genealogical iconography from Carl Schuster: (left) anthropomorphic motifs excerpted from genealogical design patterns (Schuster* et al. *1986–88, 14); (centre) enchainment of anthropomorphic motifs (Schuster* et al. *1986–88, 17); (right) drawing of man from Tikopia, Polynesia,* c. *1835, with tattoos illustrating tripartite design format dividing upper body into two halves with vertical zigzag lines down centre arranged to create a column of rhomboids flanked on either side by rows of pendant triangles (Schuster* et al. *1986–88, 531).*

involved a heterogeneous mix of human and non-human partners.

As various Andean ethnographers have noted over the years, tripartite structures form a key feature of traditional Andean thinking, evidenced in kinship systems, political organization, settlement patterns, cosmologies, textile design, etc. (Cereceda 1986; Harrison 1989; Isbell 1978; Silverblatt 1987; Urton 1997; Zuidema 1977; 1989). With the presence of a simultaneously integrating and segregating centre, the tripartite structure embodies and expresses a concern with complementary opposition and the coming together of divided halves so prevalent in the Andes. Working from these observations and associations, I suggest that the vertical tripartite design structure seen on imperial Inca wares, as well as other elements within the design repertoire, may be understood as a kind of 'genealogical iconography', a concept developed by the great comparativist scholar of 'tribal arts', Carl Schuster (1956). But *contra* Schuster (and my own earlier work, e.g. Bray 2004), approaching the Inca visual design system as a co-creator of new understandings of kinship and genealogy in the context of an emergent imperial politics, rather than as a *post facto* schematic representation of such, offers greater theoretical insight into the constitution of power in the late pre-Columbian Andes.

The principal design elements associated with the tripartite format in Inca polychrome pottery include the concentric rhombuses, the columns of Xs-&-bars, the rows of pendant triangles and the ramified stalk (or tree) motif. According to Schuster (1956; Schuster *et al.* 1986–88), these same motifs comprise the building blocks of what he deemed to be genealogical iconographic systems (Fig. 9). Schuster spent a lifetime documenting such imagery in native arts from around the world, ranging in age from the Palaeolithic period to the present day, and the corpus of material he amassed is truly monumental (Schuster *et al.* 1986–88). In the Andean context, the early seventeenth-century *mestizo* author Pachacuti Yamqui offers evidence that these same motifs held similar genealogical significance. In his well-known graphic illustrating the Inca origin place of Paccaritampotoco (Fig. 10), he employs both a tripartite format and the same geometric motifs—e.g. concentric squares, flanking trees with ramifying limbs (which he refers to in his text as 'the mother and father of the Inca') and a central rhombus (Pachacuti Yamqui 1927 [1613], 144; see also Bray 2000; Horta 2006).

Comparative studies of traditional societies provide evidence that genealogical imagery relates to the material premise that the individual is composed of two halves, each of which derive from one parent, both of whom are enchained in deep lineages of descent (Schuster & Carpenter 1996, 154). To elaborate on the potential visualization of this notion, I quote Alfred Gell (1998, 140): 'the individual is multiple in the sense of being the precipitate of a multitude of genealogical relationships, each of which is instantiated in his/her person', and conversely, 'an aggregate of

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Figure 10. *Drawing embedded in Pachacuti Yamqui's text providing graphic illustration of the Inca origin place of Paccaritampotoco; in the text, the author describes the two trees flanking the central motif (the cave or window from which the first Incas emerged) as the father and mother of the Inca (Pachacuti Yamqui 1927 [1613], 144).*

persons, such as a lineage or a tribe, is "one person" in consequence of being one genealogy: the original ancestor … now instantiated, not as one body but as the many bodies into which his one body has transformed itself'. Specific motifs extracted from genealogically related imagery, according to Schuster, often accentuate the separation between halves as well as lines of descent. The former type of patterning, the accentuation of the separation of halves, is evident in the ramifying stalk motif so prominent in Inca ceramic iconography, as well as the typical tripartite structure of the overall design format observed on imperial vessels, while the latter type, genealogical descent, is particularly evident in the horizontal rows of pendant triangles (see Fig. 7).

Another common element of genealogical symbolism is a centrally located, vertical band delineated on either side by opposing zigzag lines. This motif is interpreted as a spinal column, a material element that simultaneously links and divides vertebrate animal bodies into symmetrical halves and the corporate body into moieties, or exogamous halves (Schuster & Carpenter 1996, 60) (Fig. 9c). In Inca pottery, the vertical bands of concentric rhombuses that comprise the central panel of many imperial vessels may also be seen as opposing vertical lines of zigzags that meet at their vertices to form diamonds (see Fig. 7a). The placement of this element on the centre front of several categories of imperial vessels further suggests its association with the vertebral column and the division of the ceramic body into two halves. The rows of pendant triangles that often flank the central panel on Inca vessels with tripartite design structure can similarly be construed as horizontal bands of zigzag lines. Within a genealogical iconographic system, as noted above, these bands would be understood as single generations arranged in chains of descent through both the matri- and patri-lines (Schuster & Carpenter 1996, 94–5, 110–11).

Discussion and conclusions

In general, a good deal of the imagery found on imperial Inca pottery lends itself to the interpretation that it constituted a kind of genealogical iconography. Together with the bodies this imagery adorned, the visual design system of the Inca helped to enact a material-semiotic of power that foregrounded the significance of ancestry and origins in important commensal contexts. On the occasions of their use, the state's polychrome ceramic wares would have technically and aesthetically overwhelmed the contemporary local pottery from almost any region of the Andes, thus undoubtedly compelling attention and awe, if not respect, on the part of imperial subjects. Insofar as these 'material agents of the state' manifest the Inca ruler's role as the 'originary' (ancestral) source of sustenance and well-being, so, too, I contend, would the tactilely and visually compelling pottery of the imperial state have aided in the construction of the Sapa Inca as the wellspring of nourishment and the 'container' from which such vital substances as food and *chicha* flowed. The aesthetic qualities of these vessels—their visual appeal, their well-ordered proportionality, the sensuous feel of their well-polished surfaces, as well as their functional efficiency, enacted a superlative commensal experience that, together with a host of other actors, gave shape to a local understanding of the concept of 'ruler' and 'ruled' (and the relations that were to hold between them), transforming the fundamentals of eating and drinking into a new way of seeing and knowing the wider world—one that was being purposefully reconfigured by the Inca.

The demonstrated correspondences between ceramic design formats and motifs and the Inca *unku* suggest an indigenous ontology that engaged these made objects of clay as animate beings. Much like their human counterparts, these pots, too, required clothing to be perceived as fully enculturated members of society and, further, as co-creators and purveyors of kingly meaning and intent. Bodies, as material entities, absorb substances from the outside, transforming, storing and expelling them. The kingly body, conceived as a container of vital ancestral substances, could come to be seen as essential to the propagation of life within the imperial domain—a material-semiotic created through a network of actors that included ceramic vessels, iconographic symbols, food and drink, architectural spaces and various categories of human persons. The pottery vessels, as material agents of the state with their own physical properties and affordances, served to help construct the notion of the Sapa Inca as both sacred source and

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container of well-being. Understanding the symmetrical indexicality between the imperial ceramic corpus and the kingly body brings to the fore the mutually constituted nature of the imperial Inca project, which involved armies of both people and things.

Considered more broadly, the study presented here highlights the value of turning to the 'matter' of ancient empires for what it may reveal about how such political configurations came to be and how they were sustained. The importance of things as partners in the constitution of both rulers and ruled has only recently begun to receive serious attention in investigations of ancient imperialism (see, for example, Khatchadourian 2016; Smith 2015). Such material approaches to the archaeology of empire emphasize the ways in which power is created and enacted, not through proclamation or legislation, but rather through practical interactions between imperial subjects and imperial things. As convincingly articulated by Lori Khatchadourian (2016), imperial things operated variably—in some cases working to instantiate the experience of subjugation through imposed entanglements and real material depredations, in others, quietly manifesting the limits of imperial prerogative via physical manipulation, subversive use or purposeful rejection. Understood as efficacious state agents, the focus on imperial things promises new insights into how 'soft power' was created and effected by different imperial polities over the past several millennia. Archaeological indicators point to the idea that such political orders, rather than representing the pinnacle of rational governance involving, from an Enlightenment perspective, the relegation of the material world to inert, second-class status (see Smith 2015), instead invested heavily in things, enlisting them as primary partners in the construction of new social and political configurations.

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