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From Pots to People

Encountering Nasca

Nasca culture flourished in the Early Intermediate Period (ca. AD 1–700) in the narrow river valleys of the Río Grande de Nazca drainage and the Ica Valley in the midst of the arid south coast of Peru (figure 1.1). By the time of the Spanish conquest of the Inca empire in 1532, most traces of Nasca had long since disappeared, converting the once vibrant society into an archaeological mystery. Unlike the Moche culture of Peru’s north coast with its huge adobe pyramids or the megalithic architecture of the Tiwanaku people of the Lake Titicaca region, early explorers and travelers found little of interest in the heartland of Nasca culture, although Luis de Monzón in 1586 (cited in Mejía Xesspe 1940: 569) did note the presence of ancient “roads” on the south coast (hundreds of years later these were rediscovered as geoglyphs).

Until the beginning of the twentieth century the only “excavations” conducted at Nasca sites were the illegal lootings of cemeteries by local *huaqueros* (grave robbers). Indeed, looting began at least as early as the nineteenth century since, by then, a small amount of Nasca pottery already had made its way into the collections of several European museums (Proulx 1968: 101). The most intense and damaging looting in the region, however, occurred in the twentieth century, following the onset of scientific archaeological excavations (Tello and Mejía Xesspe 1967: 156; Uhle 1914: 8).

Ancient Nasca culture was literally discovered by Max Uhle in Ica in 1901. Uhle, a German-born archaeologist, was working at

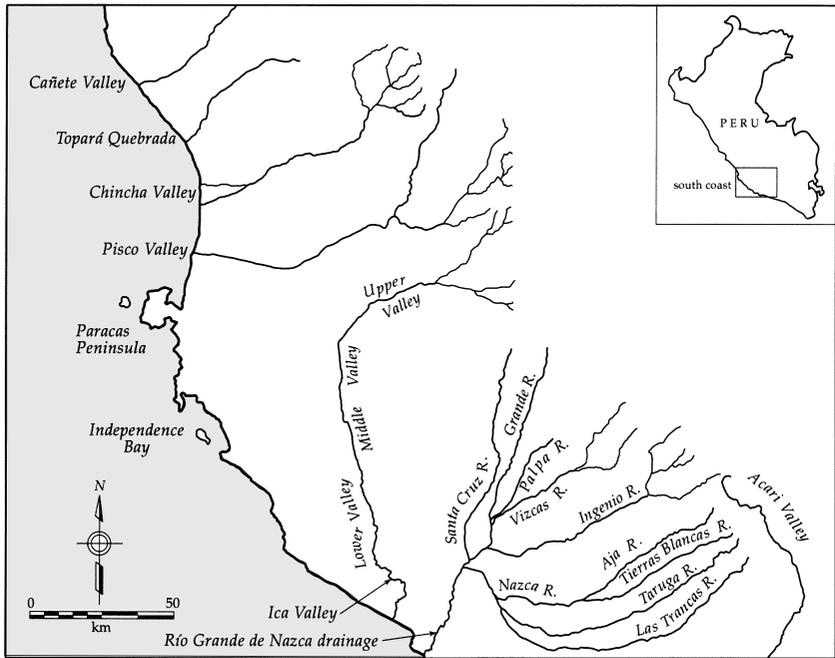


Figure 1.1 Map of the south coast of Peru.

the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin in the 1880s when he first saw several examples of exquisite polychrome pottery said to be from Peru. Fascinated by its beauty, Uhle began a decade-long quest to discover the source of these pots. His travels took him to various South American countries where he collected ethnographic and archaeological specimens for the Museum für Völkerkunde and later for the University of Pennsylvania Museum. In February 1901, Uhle realized his goal when he became the first person to scientifically excavate cemeteries containing Nasca polychrome pottery (for historical details, see Proulx 1970: 1–44). The location of these ancient graves was along the barren desert borders of the Hacienda Ocucaje in the lower Ica Valley on the south coast of Peru. Uhle sent the precisely provenienced grave goods to the University of California in Berkeley whose patron, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, had sponsored Uhle's project.

Uhle returned to the south coast of Peru in 1905 but did not excavate at this time. Rather, he purchased a large collection of

pottery in the town of Nazca that had been looted from various sites in the Río Grande de Nazca drainage (Gayton and Kroeber 1927: 3–4; Uhle 1914). This collection also was sent to Berkeley and the pottery from Uhle's two south-coast trips form the core of the Hearst Museum's outstanding collection of Nasca pottery.

It is important to put Uhle's explorations and activities on the south coast in the larger perspective of what he was trying to accomplish in Peru (see Kroeber and Strong 1924: 97–8; Rowe 1962a: 398–9). Whereas, with few exceptions, nineteenth-century books on the ancient peoples of Peru attributed all ruins to the Incas, Uhle recognized that the people who made the exquisite Nasca pottery had lived long before the Incas. Since the time of Uhle's fieldwork, Nasca has occupied an important position in the development of Peruvian archaeology and our conceptualization of the kinds of societies that existed before the Incas. The history of the investigation of Nasca society reflects, in large part, the trajectory of the study of Peru's past and trends in archaeological research.

In the years following Uhle's discovery, knowledge of the attractive polychrome pottery became widespread as more specimens arrived in Europe. Thomas A. Joyce (1912) was the first scholar to use a color drawing – published as the frontispiece of his book on South American archaeology – to illustrate the beauty of the ware. Joyce (1912: 181) also seems to have been the first to use the term “Nasca Style” to describe this pottery. He elaborated further on the nature of the pottery in an article published in *The Burlington Magazine* (Joyce 1913a).

At the same time as Joyce, Henry Forbes (1913) published a short article on Nasca pottery. In it he illustrated in color eleven superb vessels from his own collection and described mummy bundles of this culture. It is unclear where Forbes obtained his information about Nasca mummy bundles but it could have come from an article by Uhle, also published in 1913. Written in German and while Uhle was living in Santiago, Chile, this article was Uhle's first major publication on his fieldwork in the Ica Valley, conducted twelve years earlier. In 1914 Uhle published an account in English of his discovery of the Nasca style and his chronology for the Ica Valley. In the same monograph, Edward K. Putnam (1914) described and illustrated a collection of ninety-four Nasca vessels at

the Davenport Academy of Sciences. The pots had been purchased in Peru in 1911 by the Honorable C. A. Ficke, then president of that institution.

Ales Hrdlicka, a physical anthropologist, made two trips to Peru around this time, the first a brief survey in 1910 (see Hrdlicka 1911) and the second a three-month tour in 1913 which included visits to sites in the Acarí and Nazca valleys (see Hrdlicka 1914). Hrdlicka's objectives were "to determine, as far as possible, the anthropological relation of the mountain people with those of the coast; to make further studies regarding the distribution of the coast type; to determine the type of the important Nasca group of people; and to extend the writer's researches on Indian and especially pre-Columbian pathology" (Hrdlicka 1914: 2). Hrdlicka's research provided valuable insights into the form and variety of Nasca graves, the amount of looting in the area, and the range of grave goods being extracted by *huaqueros*. Hrdlicka was among the first to describe such important Acarí Valley sites as Chaviña and Tambo Viejo. He also contributed valuable information on Nasca practices of skull deformation and trephination (see discussion in chapter 4).

In 1915, Peruvian archaeologist Julio C. Tello conducted fieldwork in the Río Grande de Nazca region "with the purpose of studying the different classes of cemeteries there" (Tello 1917: 283). Tello recorded information on the shape, building material, and construction of the tombs as well as the orientation of the body and common grave goods. The frequent presence of trophy heads in the cemeteries interested Tello so much that they became the subject of his 1918 doctoral dissertation (see chapter 9). William C. Farabee, curator of the American collections at the University Museum in Philadelphia, spent one month in 1922 excavating sites in the Nazca Valley (see Mason 1926). Like Tello and other archaeologists at this time, Farabee's interest centered on cemetery excavation for the purpose of recovering fine grave goods, especially pottery.

Meanwhile, Alfred Louis Kroeber and his students at the University of California at Berkeley were analyzing Uhle's pottery collections from the many coastal valleys in which Uhle had worked, including Nazca and Ica. In the study of Uhle's materials from the Ica Valley excavations, Nasca did not figure exclusively but was

one of several major pre-Columbian styles represented (Kroeber and Strong 1924). Furthermore, Nasca was not called Nasca but, rather, “Proto-Nazca as it has become customary to designate a very striking ware” (Kroeber and Strong 1924: 96; see Uhle 1913, 1914). The concept of proto-cultures had been coined by Uhle in his study of several of the ancient coastal cultures and, despite its connotation, referred to fully developed art complexes and societies (for example, Proto-Chimú: see Uhle 1998: 206). A later study, undertaken by Kroeber with Anna Gayton, dealt specifically with Uhle’s Nasca pottery from Nazca and chronologically ordered the style into four sequential phases (see chapter 2). Diagnostic Nasca forms of pottery also were identified (see Gayton and Kroeber 1927).

Kroeber’s experience with the Uhle collections convinced him of the importance of conducting new fieldwork because he was dissatisfied with the ceramic seriation he had worked out with Gayton. By obtaining a new sample of Nasca pottery from carefully controlled grave excavations Kroeber hoped to be able to substantiate or modify the Gayton–Kroeber sequence that had relied on pottery without grave and other definite local provenience (Gayton and Kroeber 1927: 4; see also Kroeber 1956: 330). In 1926 Kroeber conducted fieldwork in Nazca which he regarded as one of the most “strategic points of attack . . . because the several cultures already known from the Nazca region presented a problem of several cultures whose sequence had not been definitely determined” (Kroeber 1937: 127). For more than three months Kroeber excavated tombs, keeping a meticulous inventory of the grave associations of each burial and recording data on the burials themselves (see Kroeber and Collier 1998). In this fieldwork Kroeber was specifically more interested in “grave contents and interrelations of these as intact units than on settlements and buildings” for he thought that “Nazca ruins and structures are modest in comparison with the fine ceramics and textiles contained in Nazca cemeteries” (Kroeber and Collier 1998: 25). The importance of Kroeber’s Nasca and Nazca work cannot be overemphasized. Kroeber (1928: 8–9) established a multi-phase chrono-stylistic sequence that ran from “Nazca A” to Inca. At the time, this was the “longest continuous [series] yet determined in Peru, possibly the oldest in absolute time, almost certainly as old as any yet resolved”

(Kroeber 1928: 9). Kroeber clearly articulated the goal of archaeological research at the time as chronology building on the basis of pottery collected through cemetery excavations; he eschewed settlement pattern archaeology. This perspective in Peruvian archaeology would not change till the Virú Valley project was conducted two decades later.

Tello returned to the Nazca region in 1926 and again in 1927. He specifically sought to excavate tombs whose contents would form collections for the Museo de Arqueología Peruana, some of which would be exhibited in Peru's pavilion at the Ibero-American Exposition in Sevilla in 1929. The nine months of fieldwork in 1927 resulted in the excavation of 537 tombs of which eighty pertained to "*Nasca clásico*" (early Nasca) and 176 to "*Chanca o Pre-Nasca*" (late Nasca) (Tello and Mejía Xesspe 1967: 147).

In 1932 the German archaeologist Heinrich Ubbelohde-Doering (1958; Neudecker 1979) traveled to the extremely arid and narrow Santa Cruz Valley in the northern Río Grande de Nazca drainage. His goal was to determine the kinds of graves in which Nasca pottery was found, the types of pottery that were found together and the kinds of weavings that were associated with the pots. He excavated about fifty graves, eight of which pertain to Nasca (see Neudecker 1979). He also excavated two Nasca graves at Cahuachi in the Nazca Valley (Ubbelohde-Doering 1958).

In so far as we know, the only fieldwork conducted in the following twenty years was a small excavation at Chaviña in Acarí in 1943 (see Lothrop and Mahler 1957). The situation changed dramatically in 1952, however, when William Duncan Strong (1957) undertook a major survey and excavation project in Ica and Nazca. It is important to remember that Strong had analyzed Uhle's pottery collections from Ica under the guidance of Kroeber when he was a college senior at Berkeley (see Kroeber and Strong 1924). Thus, Nasca was not unfamiliar to him.

Strong also had been a key participant in an important archaeological and interdisciplinary project in the Virú Valley on the north coast in 1946. In conceiving his south-coast project, Strong was influenced by the Virú Valley project's emphasis on settlement pattern archaeology. Strong (1957: 3) clearly described the primary purpose of his 1952 investigations as the determination of the temporal relationship between the Paracas and Nasca cultures

and, concomitantly, the study of settlement patterns so as to “select the most promising sites for sondage.” Strong (1957: 2) proposed to work by means of “detailed survey and stratigraphic techniques along the lines already inaugurated in Central and North Coastal Peru.”

Strong chose to concentrate his efforts at Cahuachi because he believed he would get a deeply stratified sequence there. Thus, prior to excavation, Strong already was interpreting some of Cahuachi’s architecture as “house mounds” in association with temples and cemeteries (see Strong 1957: table 1), implying that these mounds were formed by the sequential accumulation of domestic refuse and abandoned structures that then became stratified *in situ* over time. Strong’s view was repeated by various scholars (for example, Matos 1980: 488; Rowe 1960: 41) and only came to be criticized when Silverman’s (1993a *inter alia*) excavations at the site revealed that much of what Strong had interpreted as stratified habitation refuse was, in fact, construction fill for non-domestic mound architecture. What remains indisputable from Strong’s (1957: 32) project, however, is his conclusion that “Cahuachi was the greatest, and probably the main capital site of the Nazca civilization in the time of its own peculiar highest florescence” which was the early Nasca period.

Strong (1957: 36–41) also excavated at Huaca del Loro in Las Trancas, the site which gave its name to the Huaca del Loro (Nasca 8) phase and culture (see Paulsen 1983; Silverman 1988b). In addition, Strong put in a stratigraphic trench at Estaquería, a few kilometers downstream from Cahuachi, in which he recovered sherds “which were mainly of Late Nazca (B) type but also included those of the Huaca del Loro culture of the succeeding epoch of Fusion. Earlier or later types were absent” (Strong 1957: 34). Strong (1957: 34) concluded that Estaquería “is really an extension of the Cahuachi site,” a conclusion Silverman (1993a: ch. 5) has disputed.

In 1954–5 John H. Rowe (1956) directed a survey and excavation project that covered the vast southern portion of Peru. The overall purpose of this project was to establish relative chronological relationships among regions. The completion of a detailed chronology of the Nasca pottery style was assigned to Lawrence Dawson who had been working on a seriation since 1952 using Uhle’s collections at Berkeley (Rowe 1956: 135, 146, 1960). In Peru,

Dawson continued to gather more data with which to further refine the sequence. At the same time, Dorothy Menzel and Francis Riddell conducted fieldwork in the Acarí Valley (Menzel and Riddell 1986; see also Rowe 1956, 1963). They identified important Nasca 3 and Inca occupations at Tambo Viejo, the largest and most complex site in the Acarí Valley. Rowe (1963: 11–12) identified Tambo Viejo, Huarato, Chocavento, and Amato as Nasca 3 habitation sites of an intrusive and fortified nature (see counterargument in Carmichael 1992; Valdez 1998). Rowe argued that early Nasca society had been organized as a small, militaristic empire led from a capital city at Cahuachi. According to him, the empire conquered Acarí before falling at the end of Nasca 3.

Rowe, Menzel, and Dawson returned to Peru a few years later under the aegis of the US government's Fulbright Exchange Program to carry out extensive and intensive investigations in Ica (see Menzel 1971; Rowe 1963; Wallace 1962). Their fieldwork provided important new information on the Nasca occupation of the valley, particularly during epoch 7 of the Early Intermediate Period (see Menzel 1971: 86–92). Concurrently, Wallace (1958, 1971, 1986; see also Menzel 1971) surveyed and conducted small-scale excavations in Pisco, Chincha, and Cañete, gathering important information on the Nasca-contemporary styles called Carmen and Estrella (see discussion in chapters 4 and 10; Silverman 1991: fig. 9.2). In 1975 Hans Disselhoff collected fragmentary cross-knit looped and embroidered textiles at Cahuachi. Unfortunately, the context of the finds and the nature of his work are unpublished other than mention in Eisleb's (1975: figs 127–9, 138, 139, 143, 145, 148a–b) catalog of ancient Peruvian art in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin.

Although the 1950s were characterized by excavation, the goal of Nasca research continued to be ceramic chronology. This focus continued in the 1960s, now in museum basements using extant collections. This endeavor was not meant to be an end in itself but rather a tool to be taken to the field so that contemporaneity and change in the archaeological record could be recognized, thereby opening up the possibility for diachronic interpretation of cultural process.

At Berkeley, Dawson finalized a nine-phase Nasca ceramic sequence using the method of similiary seriation by continuity of

features and variation in themes (see Rowe 1959, 1960, 1961). At the same time, Kroeber (1956) revised the 1927 Gayton–Kroeber scheme, in reaction to seriations being worked out by Junius Bird at the American Museum of Natural History (unpublished) and Dawson at Berkeley. One of Rowe’s students, Richard P. Roark (1965), examined the shift from the “monumental” style of Nasca ceramic iconography to the “proliferous” style. Roark identified a major iconographic change from religious themes to militaristic ones. Another Rowe student, Donald Proulx (1968), refined the seriation of phase 3 of the Nasca sequence and examined local and regional variation in Nasca 3 and 4 pottery from Ica and Nazca. Steven Wegner (1976), who also was a student of Rowe’s, seriated Nasca 6 into three subphases. Dorothy Menzel (1977), Rowe’s Berkeley collaborator, seriated Nasca 7 into three subphases and subdivided Nasca 8 into two subphases. Menzel (1964) dealt with Nasca 9 in her study of Middle Horizon pottery. Another of Rowe’s students, Elizabeth Wolfe (1981), traced the evolution of the Spotted Cat and Horrible Bird on Nasca pottery.

Nasca pottery also was studied outside Berkeley. Silverman (1977) examined Strong’s Nasca 2 material at Columbia University. She suggested a tripartite subdivision of this phase and made interpretive comments on the nature of the society that produced this ware. In a fascinating study undertaken for her MA degree at the University of Texas at Austin, Blagg (1975) recognized concurrent stylistic variation within the Nasca 5 phase (see chapter 2). In addition to these largely chronological studies, the investigation of Nasca iconography resumed (see chapter 6).

As museum research proceeded in the United States, Carlos Williams León and Miguel Pazos Rivera (1974) surveyed the Ica Valley from San José de los Molinos in the upper valley to the lower valley oases. This fieldwork, undertaken for Peru’s Instituto Nacional de Cultura, resulted in an inventory of more than two hundred sites, including Nasca ones. Their report is a valuable, but unpublished, resource.

Archaeologists returned to the south coast in the 1980s because of a pressing need for primary (field-generated) data on Nasca social, political, and economic organization and cultural change. This focus represented a major shift in research orientation. It was born of the realization that the archaeological Nasca culture was

an intellectual construct almost devoid of societal content (see Silverman 1993a: xi). The title of this chapter reflects the significance and importance of this change in Nasca research direction.

Working largely within a processualist paradigm due to necessity, scholars studied intra-site and inter-site settlement patterns and reconstructed ancient Nasca society on this basis. Sarah Massey (1986) concentrated on the Paracas and early Nasca occupations of the upper Ica Valley. Anita Cook (1999) and Lisa DeLeonardis (1991) investigated the occupation of the lower Ica Valley, recovering information on all periods of pre-Hispanic occupation but emphasizing, thus far, the Paracas data. In the Río Grande de Nazca drainage, Helaine Silverman (1993a) excavated at Cahuachi so as to assess its alleged urban character and role in Nasca society; she then surveyed the Ingenio Valley in an attempt to contextualize Cahuachi and recover more information on Nasca settlement and society (Silverman 1993b *inter alia*). More recently, Silverman (1997) excavated in the lower Pisco Valley in order to understand the Nasca-related Carmen occupation of that valley and to contextualize the Paracas Peninsula cemeteries. Since the early 1980s Giuseppe Orefici has excavated intensively and continuously at Cahuachi (Orefici 1987, 1988, 1992, 1993, 1996; see also Bueno Mendoza and Orefici 1984; Isla 1990) as well as conducting smaller and briefer excavations at other sites (see Isla et al. 1984). Johny Isla (1992) excavated habitation contexts at Usaca as part of Orefici's project. David Browne surveyed the Palpa, Vizcas and upper Grande valleys (Browne 1992; Browne and Baraybar 1988). Palpa is being restudied by Markus Reindel and Johny Isla (1999) in a project that includes major excavations. Katharina Schreiber (1998) surveyed the southern tributaries of the Río Grande de Nazca drainage including the Nazca Valley proper. She also has done a thorough study of Nazca's filtration gallery irrigation system (Schreiber and Lancho Rojas 1995). David Johnson (1999) is investigating Nazca's underground water supply and geoglyphs. Kevin Vaughn (1999) has just completed doctoral fieldwork at an early Nasca habitation site in Tierras Blancas; he is analyzing the data from the perspective of household archaeology, an innovation in south-coast archaeology overall because of the limited number of excavations in domestic contexts. Donald Proulx (1999c) surveyed the lower Nazca and Grande valleys. Patrick Carmichael (1991) reconnoitered the

littoral zone between Acarí and the Bahía de la Independencia to ascertain if the frequent maritime iconography on early Nasca pottery was correlated with Nasca shoreline settlement. The California Institute of Peruvian Studies, directed by Francis Riddell, has been running a multi-year project in Acarí and Yauca, part of whose activities are generating valuable knowledge about Nasca on the far south coast (see, for example, Carmichael 1992; Kowta 1987; Menzel and Riddell 1986; Riddell 1985, 1986, 1989; Riddell and Valdez 1988; Valdez 1989, 1998).

Large numbers of Nasca habitation sites have been identified as a result of these surveys, whereas decades ago archaeologists complained about the lack of non-cemetery sites pertaining to Nasca culture. The recent projects also have identified a fair number of ceremonial sites in addition to Cahuachi, some quite impressive though none with Cahuachi's concentration of volumetric monumental architecture. Clearly, the chronology and collection-oriented goals of Nasca archaeology in the early twentieth century determined where archaeologists excavated and how they perceived the terrain around them.

Nasca and its Contemporaries

Nasca was one of many regional societies of the Early Intermediate Period. Among its contemporaries were Cajamarca and Recuay in the north highlands, Moche on the north coast, Lima on the central coast, and Pucara in the south highlands. In the foundational literature of the field, these societies were described as "Mastercraftsman Cultures" (see, for example, Bennett 1948: 6; Bennett and Bird 1964: 113–35), so-called because of their exquisite art styles. While the label "Mastercraftsman" is still appropriate – for no one can dispute the incredible aesthetic and technological quality of the pottery and textiles of many of these societies – it is also important to think of them in terms of "corporate styles." This is a term coined by Moseley (1992: 73) to refer to fine arts and crafts products "geared to serve corporate ends . . . aesthetic canons, design motifs, and iconography were dictated by the political and religious organizations supporting the artisans, commissioning their work, and controlling its distribution . . . characteristic of

particular polities, religions, and organizations . . . corporate symbolism.” Moseley’s appreciation of the political, social and economic aspects of craft production resituates the study of the Early Intermediate Period (EIP) societies as dynamic sociopolitical formations.

It is furthermore interesting that these EIP societies, which have been analytically sandwiched between others characterized by widespread shared cultural features (i.e. Chavín of the Early Horizon and Wari of the Middle Horizon), are not as regional or inward-looking as originally believed (see, for example, Bennett 1948: 6; Steward 1948: 104). Yes, it is certainly true that each EIP society is characterized by a pronounced territorialization: cemeteries, irrigation systems, well-developed settlement patterns, local art style. But already it is clear that Moche (see, for example, Bawden 1996; Castillo and Donnan 1994; Makowski 1994) and Nasca, at least, also manifest significant internal variation and outward projection. Indeed, whereas archaeologists have tended to study Nasca from a regionally restricted perspective – the Ica Valley and the Río Grande de Nazca drainage – we argue that Nasca must be contextualized within the larger Central Andean area since various events and processes on the coast and throughout the highlands clearly affected Nasca society and Nasca affected them along several parameters over the many centuries of Nasca’s existence. Furthermore, it has become apparent that within the Río Grande de Nazca drainage Nasca must be understood on a valley-by-valley and intra-valley basis so as to reconstruct each society comprising the archaeological Nasca culture. Clearly, all were Nasca in physical and material appearance (there were no non-Nasca people living within the Río Grande de Nazca drainage during the Early Intermediate Period). But Nasca was not a single, monolithically evolving culture.

The Relationship of People to Art Styles

So far we have said little about the people who produced the exemplary ceramics called “Nasca” beyond indicating the intellectual shift in research focus from chronology building to settlement pattern archaeology for the purpose of societal reconstruction. In

the Central Andes, as in many other areas of the world, pottery styles have served as the primary means of identifying people or ethnic groups in the archaeological record as well as being the basis for the development of a relative chronology. The imputation of identity between pottery style and ancient ethnic group is based on a number of assumptions, some of which must be used with caution.

Pottery contains technological and symbolic elements, learned by enculturation and through conviction. Each society develops its own patterns of behavior, which are reflected in artifacts, including ceramics, and other aspects of material culture such as housing. Refining this normative view of culture is the knowledge that, at the same time, material culture can be deployed consciously, expressively, and “*emblemically*” by societies, groups within societies, and smaller divisions thereof down to the level of the family and individual. Furthermore, ideas can be borrowed from other ethnic groups. People can migrate to new locations. Ethnic identity is multi-dimensional; it is shifting and subjective; it is situationally subject to negotiation (for example, culture-differentiating barriers between individuals and between groups of varying inclusiveness can be raised and lowered selectively). All of this complicates the interpretation of style as a primary basis for the identification of group cohesiveness.

The reconstruction of a society that lacks any form of writing is particularly difficult. In the following chapters we attempt to “*flesh out*” a dynamic picture of Nasca ethnic identity and Nasca society based on preserved material culture and its patterns of distribution and also through the judicious use of ethnographic analogy, ethnohistory, and other techniques. Our conclusions will surely be modified as new field data become available in the future.