

1 Navigating Tensions: Integrating Indigenous Knowledge and Ownership in Peruvian Archaeology

The discipline of archaeology seeks to understand past events and the origins of human societies' customs. The materiality it studies, composed of ancient artifacts, abandoned structures, and the landscapes related to them, provides a glimpse into the complexity of human development throughout history. However, in recent decades, the validity of predominant models in the Western academic tradition – which emphasize empirical data, scientific objectivity, and universalist interpretations – has increasingly been questioned (Shanks and Tilley, 2016). This shift has introduced significant challenges, such as reconciling archaeological research with local perspectives and traditional ecological knowledge, that prioritize a more contextual understanding and foregrounds affective and relational connections to the past (Atalay, 2010; Jessen *et al.*, 2022; Smith, 1999; Wobst, 2010). The Peruvian context vividly highlights these profound tensions, as conflicts between state legislation and Indigenous communities over territorial rights are frequent (Morales, 2024). These disputes are further complicated by the contentious issue of the ownership of pre-Columbian remains, which hinders archaeological work and creates a highly intricate landscape for heritage exploration (Cojti Ren, 2010). Addressing these difficulties requires a paradigm shift that recenters Indigenous voices and values in archaeological practice. In this Element, we argue why the Peruvian case can become a model for more equitable and inclusive approaches to heritage management.

By directly studying the remnants of the past, archaeologists have the power to create discourses that impact society, influencing our view of history. It is worth asking whether these narratives include the local voices whose interests are usually marginalized. This is relevant considering that many Indigenous communities surviving today have strong ties to the lands of their ancestors and maintain many traditional customs passed down through generations (Atalay, 2010, p. 84). These ancestral epistemologies therefore encompass intimate understandings of their environment in connection with a spiritual world still active in modern times. That is, they feature the complex relationships between land, resources, and spirituality expressed in daily cultural practices (Allen, 2021). While the passage of time and the impacts of colonialism and modernity on Indigenous communities are undeniable, it is still possible to find in Peru certain continuities and resistances that provide context for the analysis of pre-Columbian remains challenging our Western preconceptions (Atalay, 2010, p. 85).

On the other hand, it is true that many studies do not seek to create links with the communities living near archaeological sites beyond employing them for

excavations. The reasons for this include colonial legacies prioritizing Western scientific methods, language barriers, and structural inequities marginalizing Indigenous voices in decision-making. As a result, archaeology risks perpetuating the same patterns of exclusion it often seeks to critique. In this sense, the multiple efforts to address these issues increasingly demonstrate global interest in initiatives like collaborative archaeology, which seeks to involve different members of Indigenous communities as active partners in research (Wobst, 2010, p. 23). Collaborative archaeology bridges the typical requirements of academic research and the reconsideration of the central role Indigenous communities play in conceiving their own history.

Decolonial and Indigenous studies imply that researchers reflect on their methodologies to redefine them and thus to be able to challenge the hegemonic discourses we still rely on (Smith, 1999). This attitude contributes to fostering a more just and mutually beneficial knowledge exchange where the local voice can also be heard. In this specific case, the validation of Indigenous communities to access and study the site transcends purely legal frameworks toward moral and ethical ones.

To address this point, we have opted to use a more literary and subjective writing style when telling the story of the members of the Huaca Pintada community. This decision can be fully justified within the framework of an approach to Indigenous studies, which vindicates an epistemological position questioning traditional modes of knowledge production, often rooted in Eurocentric paradigms (Shanks and Tilley, 2016; Smith, 1999). In other words, our goal is to create coherence between content and form. From this perspective, the use of a more sensitive and open style, inspired by literary or journalistic writings, attempts to go beyond the rigid objectification typical of classical scientific discourse. The latter, although indispensable in many fields, can reduce individuals and communities to mere data elements or objects of study. We believe that adopting a more subjective writing style allows for greater respect toward the actors themselves, recognizing the legitimacy of their stories and perspectives. This implies establishing proximity between the author and the study subjects, not to erase scientific rigor, but to reveal their humanity or character more subtly. This choice also reflects the wishes of the members of the La Pintada community, who expressed their desire to see their full names and parts of their personal stories included in the text when they read it. Thus this style of writing, midway between testimony and analysis, promotes a truer and more equitable understanding of their life and the experiences we shared in the field.

Yet in Latin American countries like Peru, the challenge of reconciling Indigenous perspectives seems even more complex due to the complicated

interactions between the Indigenous peoples and strict state laws seeking to protect cultural sites and local communities (Anaya, 2014; Kania, 2019). The problem arises when these laws clash with the immediate needs of Indigenous communities living in areas surrounding archaeological sites. Peru's legal framework for cultural heritage protection, including the 2004 General Law of Cultural Heritage, prioritizes the preservation of archaeological sites as national assets. Although well intentioned, these laws often conflict with the rights and livelihoods of Indigenous communities living near or atop such sites. In many cases, state-led conservation projects impose land-use restrictions, such as prohibiting farming, construction, or grazing, essential for local subsistence. An illustrative case is the ongoing tension between the Peruvian government and Indigenous communities in the Sacred Valley of the Incas, home to iconic sites like Machu Picchu and Ollantaytambo (Doughty, 2014). While these sites are celebrated as symbols of national identity and attract millions of tourists annually, the surrounding communities often bear the burden of conservation policies. Farmers may be evicted or face fines for cultivating ancestral lands designated as protected areas, even though their agricultural practices are often sustainable and deeply rooted in the region's history.

Moreover, many sites are threatened by the illegal appropriation of territory by unscrupulous organizations that, through their actions, not only loot the remains but also destroy all contextual information related to cultural assets (Chirinos Ogata, 2018; Rødal, 2017; SAFE, 2018). Indigenous communities are frequently caught between conflicting imperatives: preserving cultural heritage, protecting their land from exploitation, and meeting their immediate economic needs. This tension underscores the insufficiency of state-centered conservation models that do not consider local realities. This dichotomy between total heritage preservation and meeting contemporary Indigenous communities' demands outlines a landscape of struggle for the recognition of rights, resource management, and the Indigenous peoples' identity (Cojti Ren, 2010, p. 203).

This issue also raises a question: Who has the right to claim and interpret pre-Columbian remains? The Peruvian state asserts its sovereignty over these sites as part of the national heritage, a stance rooted in postcolonial efforts to build a cohesive national identity.¹ However, this position often overlooks the fact that many archaeological sites hold specific significance for Indigenous

¹ Ownership disputes are also complicated by the role of international stakeholders. Museums, private collectors, and foreign archaeologists have historically removed artifacts from Peru, often under dubious circumstances. Although repatriation efforts, such as the return of Machu Picchu artifacts from Yale University, have gained traction in recent years, the broader legacy of colonial plunder continues to cast a shadow over archaeological practice (Swanson, 2009). Indigenous communities argue that these artifacts should not only be returned but also placed under local stewardship, challenging the state's monopoly over cultural heritage.

communities, who may see themselves as direct descendants and guardians of the cultures that created them. For example, the Nazca Lines, a UNESCO World Heritage site, are often framed in global discourse as an enigmatic marvel of human ingenuity. However, for local Indigenous groups, the geoglyphs are more than a tourist attraction or an object of scientific study; they are imbued with spiritual and cultural meaning. Similarly, the fortress of Kuélap in northern Peru, a pre-Inca structure built by the Chachapoya people, holds deep ancestral significance for contemporary Indigenous communities in the region. These groups may view state-led archaeological interventions as acts of dispossession, stripping them of their cultural agency and alienating them from their heritage.

In this context, the ambiguity surrounding pre-Columbian remains plays a crucial role in how the archaeological site is approached. Our case study, at the Huaca Pintada site located in the Lambayeque department on Peru's north coast, highlights the challenges faced during the site's excavation. A conflict arose because the monument was legally situated on private land belonging to a local family initially opposed to the project. However, we explore how solutions were achieved thanks to community support, which saw in the archaeological project a potential to reconnect with their ancestral legacy. Finally, we demonstrate how an approach based on mutual respect and reciprocity allowed access to the site and led to the rediscovery of the forgotten treasures of Huaca Pintada. In this way, the *huacas* served as a bridge, fostering integration between the archaeological project and the community. The term *huaca* (from Quechua, often translated as "sacred place" or "sacred object") designates natural formations or human-made monuments imbued with spiritual essence and agency within Andean cosmology.

Through our experience at the Huaca Pintada site, we aim to show that participation and collaboration with the Indigenous community emerged as key to addressing these challenges. Adopting community-based approaches in archaeology, such as participatory research and collaborative decision-making, establishes a solid foundation for mutual understanding, respect, and co-ownership of the archaeological heritage. Working together enables archaeologists and Indigenous communities to develop research agendas that honor Indigenous knowledge, respect cultural protocols, and empower local communities.

2 The Huaca Pintada Archaeological Project

2.1 The Historical and Cultural Contexts of Huaca Pintada

During the 9th century AD, more than 600 years before the European conquest of the continent, the Pacific coast of northern Peru experienced a significant cultural transformation following the decline of the Moche civilization. The Moche, who

had thrived in this arid region since the beginning of the millennium, were renowned for their artistic refinement and monumental adobe temples, near which some of the wealthiest burials in South America have been discovered (Alva, 1994; Alva and Donnan, 1993; Castillo, 2001; Larco, 1948; Millaire, 2002). The resulting transitional period brought profound changes exacerbated by political, economic, and social disruption. As a result, the once great centers of Moche power were largely abandoned, giving way to major political restructuring that may have been catalyzed by migratory movements (Bawden, 1996; Rucabado-Yong, 2006; Rucabado-Yong and Castillo, 2003; Shimada, 1994). It is within this dynamic and tumultuous context that the Lambayeque culture emerged. Indeed, recent archaeological evidence suggests that this cultural development was part of a complex and highly dynamic social process, challenging previous assumptions about its origins (Castillo, 2012; Curo Chambergo and Rosas Fernández, 2014; Ghavami, 2021; Rucabado-Yong, 2006; Rucabado-Yong and Castillo, 2003). The Lambayeque or Sicán culture was largely influenced by the Moche cultural heritage, yet it also incorporated new elements and certain innovations from neighboring Andean cultures such as the Huari and the Cajamarca. This demonstrates how societies can reinterpret and transform elements of their past while adapting to new social and environmental realities. The resulting cultural expression is a testament to the resilience and creativity of these communities, producing a unique and rich cultural legacy (Lavalle, 1989; Makowski, 2016; Shimada, 1995; Wester La Torre, 2010).

The desert landscape of the northern coast of Peru remains deeply marked by its history. In the Lambayeque region alone, several hundred ancient pre-Columbian temples, shaped like truncated pyramids and known as huacas, still stand today. These structures carry an almost mystical aura, serving as a reminder that this region was once the sacred heartland of ancient civilizations. However, the environment has undergone significant changes over time. The huacas no longer occupy a central role in the political and religious life of the contemporary inhabitants of the north coast – at least not at first glance. This is because nearly half a millennium ago, the Spanish Crown imposed Catholicism on the subject peoples, and those who sought to revive the ancient beliefs were persecuted for idolatry (Gareis, 2007). Consequently, the huacas were abandoned, allowing time to exert its power of oblivion.

Today, the preservation of these ruins varies widely. Many are buried under layers of earth formed by natural sedimentation and wind. The most monumental structures remain prominent in the landscape, standing as enduring witnesses to the grandeur of the past. In contrast, the more modest huacas are often indistinguishable from ordinary mounds of earth to the untrained eye. It is



Fig. 1 Huaca El Pueblo in the center of the village of Túcume.

frequently the violent El Niño phenomena, which inundate the region every decade, that reveal their hidden structures through gaping cracks exposing the ancient mud bricks. Some huacas are now surrounded by cultivated fields, while others stand incongruously near gas stations or agricultural factories, far removed from the reverence they once commanded (Fig. 1).

2.2 An Enigmatic Pre-Columbian Fresco

Just one kilometer north of the village of Túcume, known for its immense archaeological site made up of 26 truncated pyramids (Heyerdahl *et al.*, 1995), a blue sign from the Ministry of Culture of Peru reads in capital letters “SITIO ARQUEOLOGICO LA PINTADA. ZONA ARQUEOLOGICA INTANGIBLE” (Fig. 2). The name of this huaca is familiar to archaeologists and other scholars who have studied this singular transitional phase even though before our work no major scientific excavation had ever been undertaken on the site. American pioneer Wendel Bennett intervened in Huaca Pintada during his research in northern Peru in 1936 but excavated only three small pits where he exhumed the remains of an individual belonging to the Lambayeque culture (Bennett, 1939). Then, in 1978, an article by American scholar Richard Schaedel reignited interest in this site, long neglected by the scientific community. Schaedel’s work unveiled the iconography of a mysterious polychrome



Fig. 2 The sign from the Ministry of Culture of Peru signaling the Huaca Pintada.

mural, nearly 18 meters long, which had been accidentally discovered by a group of grave looters in 1916 (Schaedel, 1978).

This discovery was probably one of the most sensational of its time since in 1916 – only five years after Hiram Bingham’s “international discovery” of Machu Picchu – little was known about the pre-Hispanic societies of the north coast of Peru. Naturally, the Spanish and mestizo chroniclers wrote extensively about the Incas, largely because this civilization had established a vast empire spanning 2,500,000 square kilometers along the Andes shortly before the arrival of the colonizers. We now know that the Inca Empire ruled for about a century between the 15th and 16th centuries and was the heir to a civilizational development spanning 4,000 years (Bauer, 1998; Kosiba, 2015; Pease, 2007). However, because no writing systems from these cultures have been deciphered, the traces left behind – primarily archaeological remains – are essential to understanding their history. By uncovering these remnants buried in the earth, we can learn about the peoples who inhabited these regions before the rise of the Incas. Representations of daily life and religious practices offer invaluable opportunities to interpret their meaning and reconstruct the customs of these ancient societies. To achieve this, it is necessary to study their symbols and way of life, often shrouded in mystery. In this

sense, the great mural of Huaca Pintada revealed for the first time a monumental support of the sacred iconography of the peoples of the northern coast. It enabled us to glimpse the stories to which the very identity of these people was attached. These images allow us to access the inner narratives of these societies, transcending the biased accounts of Spanish travelers who perceived them through a Christian prism. In this way, these representations serve as a form of traditional ecological knowledge that has been preserved for more than a millennium.

At that time, not only was the field of archaeology still in its infancy, but there were also no laws to protect the cultural heritage of the newly established Peruvian Republic. This lack of regulation allowed widespread looting of ancient sites. In response, a Lambayeque resident named Lorenzo Orrego, captivated by the majesty of a significant discovery, sought to involve local authorities in protecting the site. However, to do so, he needed to stop the looting of the monument. Orrego attempted to prohibit access to the site, but his efforts provoked the anger of the looters. They resented being barred from exploiting a site they had discovered and, in retaliation, destroyed the large painted wall, effectively eliminating any possibility of recovering the monument (Brüning, 1917; Orrego, 1927).

It is important to note that, at the time, looting was not universally regarded as illegal or immoral. For many, it was a casual activity practiced across various social strata. Ambitious individuals might have viewed looting as a source of income, but for others, it was almost a form of recreation (Chirinos, 2018). It was common for families or groups of friends to visit huacas in search of hidden treasures. Wealthier individuals often took pride in photographing themselves at the ruins after clearing the area and would keep material souvenirs as mementos. During Semana Santa (Easter) holidays, families traditionally ventured into fields to uncover relics gifted by Pachamama (Mother Earth). These finds typically consisted of ceramic fragments, embroidered textiles, or small shell beads that had once been part of bracelets or necklaces. This complex and often contradictory relationship with archaeological heritage persists among the inhabitants of Peru's northern coast. Examining these connections – rooted in a hybrid cultural dynamic – is essential for understanding their evolving relationship with history (Soto Roland, 2014) (Fig. 3).

Fortunately, renowned German ethnographer Heinrich Brüning, who explored the valleys of the Lambayeque region from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, made a brief stop at Huaca Pintada (Brüning, 1917). During his visit, he photographed the fresco shortly before its destruction (Figs. 4 and 5). These photographs, later rediscovered by chance in the archives of the Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg, formed the basis for Richard