The Cupisnique (ca. 1000–200 B.C.) and the Moche (ca. 100 B.C.–A.D. 800) inhabited much of the same territory of Peru's north coast in Precolumbian times, and both are noted for their extraordinary and distinct artistry. Despite the distinctiveness of the two art styles, various similarities between them have been noted. One investigation concluded that archaistic copying was the explanation for the similarities (Rowe 1971). In contrast, the present study arrives at the opposite interpretation: that the Moche knew the symbolic content of the earlier images and retained it. Decapitation is a concept that is essentially pan-Andean and, therefore, it is not surprising that both the Cupisnique and the Moche subscribed to it. What is surprising, particularly in view of the universality of the idea, is that both groups employed virtually the same cast of characters. This paper demonstrates a continuity of belief between Cupisnique and Moche societies through an investigation of the Decapitator theme.

Peru's most ancient cultures appear to have imprinted their beliefs and rituals indelibly upon the fabric of Andean culture. Of particular importance was the Cupisnique "cult," a group of early peoples whose beliefs must have burned deep into the Andean psyche, for, following their demise (ca. 200 B.C.), there is iconographic evidence that their beliefs survived and were transmitted to later peoples (Isbell and Cook 1987; Mackey and Hastings 1982:307–308; Rowe 1971).

The Cupisnique people are most frequently referred to as a cult. There are two intertwined reasons for this. First, there is little direct evidence of their patterns of social organization, demography, or subsistence strategies. What is known concerning these areas has been inferred, in large part, from Cupisnique architecture and art. The architecture can be termed "corporate," indicating that it was not assembled haphazardly on an ad hoc basis (cf. Moseley [1985] for an extended definition of corporate architecture in Precolumbian Peru). Rather, the systematic arrangement of structures in Cupisnique sites (such as the Los Reyes complex in the Moche Valley) indicates the presence of an organized, stratified society of—among others—architects and designers, skilled artisans, and manual laborers. Base personnel of farmers, fisherfolk, hunters, or traders also must have existed to support the upper echelons of the society, but almost nothing can be said about such groups at the present stage of research.

The second reason for referring to a Cupisnique cult is that, beyond the formal and structural regularities of Cupisnique architecture, many buildings were embellished with painted and incised stucco relief work depicting surreal creatures. The archaeological sites of Los Reyes, Cerro Blanco, Punkuri, Moxeke, Cerro Sechin, and Garagay all display buildings with such decoration. In addition, Cerro Sechin’s outermost building is ornamented further with blocks of incised stone.

In addition to the architectural ornamentation, virtually all other forms of Cupisnique art are bereft of commonplace representations. Supernatural creatures and their component parts literally...
festoon all media. "Natural" objects do appear in Cupisnique art, but analysis has shown them to exist within a supernatural or religious context (Cordy-Collins 1977, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1982; Lathrap 1977). For these reasons, Cupisnique society is seen as one strongly rooted in and absorbed by religion. Following Anthony Wallace (1966), who classifies all religious institutions as one of four types of cults, it seems fair to refer to the Cupisnique people as a cult, probably a shamanistic one. However, although a decided commonality exists in the artistry at the various Cupisnique sites, there is no reliable evidence that they were united other than through a similar religious outlook. Therefore, to call the Cupisnique more than a cult stretches the available data.

The Cupisnique—sometimes called coastal Chavin—had as their immediate sphere of influence an area radiating outward from the Quebrada de Cupisnique, a region they seem to have dominated for a millennium or more (Figure 1). Although the impact of their ideology extended from their coastal homeland to the eastern side of the Andean cordillera, in time the Cupisnique star faded, and the emerging north-coast cultures went on to develop their own character. Thus, the Cupisnique twilight witnessed the birth of the Moche, Salinar, Vicús, and Gallinazo (Virú) cultures. Of these, by far the most vibrant was the Moche, whose kingdom eclipsed its brethren to span nine centuries (ca. 100 B.C.–A.D. 800).

A great deal more is known about Moche society than about Cupisnique. Several Moche ar-
Chaeological sites have been well excavated, and they tell a consistent story. The society was highly stratified; it incorporated a base population of farming and fishing folk, a “middle class,” and an elite population of extraordinary wealth (Donnan 1978, 1990). And, while there was a definite distinction in the material culture between the Moche of the north coast and of the far north coast (Donnan 1990), there was also a religious commonality that transcended time and space (Donnan 1992). This religious aspect of Moche society is of major interest in the present study.

Not only were the Moche the most dynamic of the societies that followed Cupisnique, but they seem to have been the one most intrigued with Cupisnique artistic forms and iconographic motifs. Decapitation was one theme of special import to both the Cupisnique and the Moche.

THE MOCHE-CUPISNIQUE CONNECTION

In 1971 John H. Rowe reported his discovery that Moche artisans had created a group of ceramics that archaized mythological designs from Cupisnique wares. Rowe pointed out that, although the design motifs on certain Moche jars and bottles could be likened more to Cupisnique prototypes than to anything theretofore created by the Moche, the latter artisans either had misunderstood the original ideological meanings, or they cavalierly had reinterpreted them, using Cupisnique appearances while imbuing them with new symbolic content (Rowe 1971:Figures 1–3, 6, 9–13, 15–16). Rowe’s analysis introduced the question of how the Moche had come by the ancient symbols. Might they have chanced upon a cache of Cupisnique artifacts that had inspired them, had there been an underlying stratum of Cupisnique religious belief present within the Moche kingdom from the beginning that—for some particular reason—surfaced so dramatically in the production of these “archaized” wares, or might there have been another reason? Rowe’s (1971:111) speculation was that the Moche had collected Cupisnique antiques that they subsequently used as models for their designs.

While this may well have been the scenario for the creation of the wares with archaized motifs, this essay demonstrates that there is another category of Moche “imitations” of Cupisnique motifs, that of a continuing tradition. This interpretation is discussed in greater detail below.

THE DECAPITATION THEME

The concept of decapitation seems to be pan-Andean in scope, and on the north coast of Peru during Cupisnique and Moche times the concept was codified as a theme. A theme is characterized as a “specific set of symbolic elements” (Donnan 1978:158). The Decapitation theme is composed of opposing characters, a decapitator and the decapitated. Decapitators are creatures who have severed their victim’s head from the body. The decapitated victims are represented in either of two ways: as a body and a head separated from one another, or—more usually—simply as a severed head or heads. In the Cupisnique repertoire, decapitators appear in five supernatural guises: Human, Monster, Bird, Fish, and Spider. Their victims are always human. Moche decapitators are the same five beings, plus two more: a Crab and a Scorpion. Additionally, in the Moche sample, the Monster is a victim as well as a victor. Cupisnique representations infrequently show a decapitation tool, a rectangular-shaped object. Conversely, Moche decapitators always wield a long-handled crescent-bladed knife known as a tumi.

It is interesting that, while there is such a tight set of symbolic elements that make up the Decapitation theme, the actual number of representations of the theme is quite small for both Cupisnique and Moche—perhaps one percent of the known samples. Even so, not every specimen is illustrated in this report.

CUPISNIQUE DECAPITATORS

The five Cupisnique decapitators were incised on bone and stone ornaments, and engraved on small stone bowls and vases. Each piece is executed in the elaborate, dynamically fluid style that tends to characterize Cupisnique art.
Figure 2. Image from a Cupisnique stone bowl of a Supernatural Human Decapitator holding a severed human head in one hand, a knife in the other (redrawn from Salazar Burger and Burger [1982:Figure 11]). Brooklyn Museum, New York.

**Supernatural Human Decapitator**

The Supernatural Human Decapitator elaborately rendered in Figure 2 (carved on the exterior of a stone bowl), not only has six similar human heads on his body, but holds a seventh in one hand. His other hand holds a rectangular object that is probably a knife. The other faces that decorate many of the emanations from the decapitator's body could indicate additional victims, but it seems more likely that they are the visual metaphors (or “kennings”) best known from the related highland Chavin art style. John Rowe (1962) proposed that the term kenning be employed to describe metaphoric imagery created by Chavin artisans. The term derives from Old Norse court poetry where familiar terms were replaced by others to be understood only by an audience conversant with the metaphor. For instance, the term “sea” would be replaced by “the seal's field.” Rowe argued that the Chavin employed a similar technique using pictures instead of words. Over the past 30 years kenning has come into common parlance in Andean studies, being applied to art styles other than Chavin and, in fact, is frequently used as a verb.

**Supernatural Monster Decapitator**

There are two representations of the Monster Decapitator (Figure 3), carved on a small stone cylindrical vase. Both images of the creature are bisected, thus allowing it to be seen in frontal view (left) and in profile (right) simultaneously. Several small human heads ornament the bisection (shown as an enlarged vertebral column) and another head, although very abstracted, is held by the hair in the outstretched hand. The other hand holds a rectangular decapitation tool in front of the body. The Monster's most distinguishing features are his long muzzle and his divided topknot.

**Supernatural Bird Decapitator**

The sample also includes one representation of a Supernatural Bird Decapitator (Figure 4), carved on a small stone vase. The creature is shown in profile, facing left. His eye is striped and his mouth is fanged. A kenning in the form of an agnathic face (one lacking a lower jaw) indicates the juncture at which his tail emerges from his body. His beak is superimposed over the flowing hair of the
severed head that he grasps with one hand. Blood flowing from the head is kenned as a second, albeit inverted, disembodied head.

*Supernatural Fish Decapitator*

The single example of a Fish Decapitator is fragmentary (Figure 5). The image was carved on the base of a stone bowl that since has been damaged, and not all the original details are evident. Nonetheless, it is clear that the main figure is an anthropomorphic, and therefore, supernatural fish. His body is covered with scales. What may be a scaly fish tail rises to the right above his left hand. This hand grasps a disembodied human head by its hair. Three other lone human heads appear, as well as two small fish, and another animal—possibly a seal—that the Fish holds by its neck in his other hand.

Figure 3. Cupisnique images of the Monster Decapitator carved on a stone cylinder vase (redrawn from an unpublished original by J. Bird).

Figure 4. Carved Supernatural Bird Decapitator from a Cupisnique stone vessel (redrawn from Roe [1974: Figure 34]).
Supernatural Spider Decapitator

The Supernatural Spider Decapitator was first identified by Lucy Salazar Burger and Richard Burger (1982). There are four examples of this individual (Figure 6; see also Salazar Burger and Burger 1982:Figures 8–16), all carved on stone vessels. Like the other decapitators, this one is primarily anthropomorphic, with arachnid features added. The latter consist of distinctive pincer-like jaws placed in front of the human mouth, spinnerets from which web silk is spun—located at the opposite end of the body, and segmented legs that end in a claw element. Although only four spider legs are illustrated rather than the normal eight, a single human leg and arm are shown as well. This reduction in the number of appendages might indicate that the creature simply is being viewed in profile.
The severed human heads are shown variously: clustered in the web or net bag that covers the decapitator's body, and another one held in his hand by its hair (Salazar Burger and Burger 1982). In Figure 6 each of the two Spider Decapitators also has a web or a net covering his body, one containing multiple disembodied heads, and the other with only a single large head that fills the web. In addition, both decapitators hold a larger disembodied head kenned as a tuber. This particular visual metaphor is intriguing. It suggests that such heads were looked on as something to be harvested. This suggestion is reinforced by examples of Cupisnique modeled ceramic tubers incised with human heads (Lapiner 1976:Figure 107). It is also intriguing that only in the Spider Decapitator representations are the severed heads in webs/bags. Because natural web-spinning spiders catch their prey in their sticky webs and bundle the victims therein, the web/net visual metaphor is an apt one for this particular decapitator. Furthermore, perhaps akin to the modeled tubers just mentioned are the frequent representations of disembodied heads shown in a netted format on many Cupisnique ceramic bottles (Lapiner 1976:Figure 113). If these and the tubers are meant to show the Spider Decapitator's bound catch, they provide abbreviated versions of the full iconography and, thus, extend the sample considerably.

MOCHE DECAPITATORS

Moche decapitators are represented both in metal and in ceramic. The metalwork is fashioned into ornaments of various shapes such as crescentic pendants, elaborate discs with metal spangles (Lapiner 1976:Figure 363), crescent-shaped bells (Alva 1988:522), long trapezoidal warriors' back-flaps (Alva 1988:545), and in one case a round, lidded container. Ceramics are stirrup-spout bottles or jars.

There are seven supernatural Moche decapitators. Five are the same individuals as in the Cupisnique sample—the Human, the Monster, the Bird, the Fish, and the Spider. Two others—a Scorpion and a Crab—have been identified only in the Moche inventory. All these decapitators employ a crescent-bladed knife for decapitation. Actual examples of these tumis have been found archaeo-
Figure 8. Images of the Monster Decapitator that had been painted in fine line on a Moche stirrup-spout bottle. His parted tresses are represented as opposing curls. Linden Museum, Stuttgart. D. McClelland drawing from photograph by C. Donnan; courtesy McClelland and Donnan.

logically. All are metal, either gold, silver, copper, or an alloy of those metals (Donnan 1978:Figure 107). Two were excavated in situ on the upper chest of a Moche lord interred at the site of Sipán in the Lambayeque Valley (Alva 1988:534). Christopher Donnan (1988) suggests that such crescent knives may have indicated one’s role within a decapitation cult. In other words, this interred individual once may have been a real-life decapitator in Moche society.

Supernatural Human Decapitator

The Supernatural Human Decapitator is simply clothed in a loincloth and sometimes a tied belt or a tunic. He can wear neck, nose, or ear ornaments, and a headdress. His face may be wrinkled and his mouth may be fanged or simply “lazy-8” shaped (Figure 7; Donnan 1978:Figure 106).

Supernatural Monster Decapitator

There is more variation in the way the Monster Decapitator is represented (for example, see Figure 8). Most usually he wears a tunic and a loincloth, and sometimes a collar or belt. Earrings are uncommon. The Monster’s most distinguishing features are his long animal muzzle and his topknot. The latter may appear as tresses parted to either side of his head or as opposing curls. Occasionally it is omitted. He may have muzzle curls/spikes as well, and frequently, spiky projections emanate from his sides. Although at first inspection the range of variation might seem to indicate that more than a single creature is represented, this is not so. There is an overlap of traits which argues that only one creature was intended (see also Castillo 1989:99–125).

An interesting group of bottles shows the Supernatural Human Decapitator in combat with the Monster Decapitator. The two individuals are readily distinguishable since the Monster is shown with divided tresses and body spikes. Several relief-decorated bottles illustrate the pair engaged in hand-to-hand combat (Figure 9). An additional bottle lends more detail to the event portrayed (Figure 10). It may be that this group of bottles recounts events in a sequential narrative (see Castillo [1989:172–177] for a discussion of Moche sequential narrative). A majority of the relief bottles show the Monster on the left half of the vessel, holding a *tumi* in one hand and a severed head in the other. On the right the Supernatural Human Decapitator brandishes a *tumi* in one hand, but grasps one of the Monster’s tresses with the other (Figure 9). The remaining vessels in this group are similar, but the Monster appears as the right-hand member of the pair and, instead of holding a human head, he grasps the arm of the Supernatural Human Decapitator who holds his lock of hair.

Additional bottles testify to the aftermath of the combat (Figure 10). The modeled example suggests
that the Monster is losing the battle; the Supernatural Human Decapitator grabs the Monster’s hair with one hand and with the other holds his *tumi* to the creature’s throat. Other bottles confirm the outcome. The Supernatural Human Decapitator stands victorious, having severed the Monster’s head from its body (Donnan 1978:Figure 152).

Figure 10. Two views of a Moche stirrup-spout bottle (spout missing); *left*, the Supernatural Human Decapitator holds his *tumi* at the Monster’s throat, apparently about to decapitate him; *right*, he grasps the hair of the Monster Decapitator. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima. Courtesy C. Donnan, photographer.
Figure 11. Moche stirrup-spout bottle modeled and painted in the form of a Supernatural Bird Decapitator (owl) who holds a *tumi* in one hand and a severed human head in the other. Courtesy Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles. Photograph by the author.

**Supernatural Bird Decapitator**

The single example of the Supernatural Bird Decapitator—probably an owl—is a modeled and painted ceramic bottle (Figure 11). It clutches a *tumi* in one hand, its lanyard visible as well, and a disembodied human head in the other.

**Supernatural Fish Decapitator**

There is also only a single example of a Fish Decapitator, and this is painted on a stirrup-spout bottle (Figure 12). As with the decapitators discussed previously, this creature holds a *tumi* with its lanyard in one hand and a disembodied human head in the other.

**Supernatural Spider Decapitator**

Many examples of the Spider Decapitator are known, both on ceramics and on metal objects. A graphic example of a Supernatural Spider Decapitator is pictured in Figure 13, whereas other
examples are more abstract (Figure 14 is representative). What at first appears to be a Supernatural Human Decapitator is ultimately identifiable as a spider by dint of its eight legs—the "ladder"-like extensions that emanate from the creature's shoulders and sides, which is a physiognomy peculiar to arachnids. Legs are segmented and have claws at the termini, features that are also characteristic of arachnid anatomy (the clawed and segmented legs of the Cupisnique Spider, Figure 6, are comparable).
Supernatural Scorpion and Crab Decapitators

There is but a single example of each of these creatures, both in Trujillo, Peru. The Scorpion is identifiable by virtue of its multiple legs and diagnostic thorax with a stinger at the tip. A tumi is held in its right hand, a human head is in its left. A broad crustacean’s body and six animal legs identify the other decapitator as a Crab. A tumi is held in one hand, a severed human head in the other.

INTERPRETATION

The Moche Decapitation theme is not archaized; it derives directly from a Cupisnique prototype. Although the concept and practice of taking human heads is part of the greater Precolumbian Andean tradition, the Cupisnique and Moche representations are so similar to one another that they argue for a direct transferece of religious belief, not archaistic copying. The distinction between archaism and continuing belief is important to stress because upon it hinges the argument that the Moche purposefully appropriated Cupisnique decapitator icons. Archaism is the stylistic imitation by one group of the artifacts of an earlier one. Because it is style being copied, the copyists may omit the original meaning of the images they are imitating. By “style” I mean the patterned arrangement of design elements particular to any group of people working with a culturally inclusive mental template in a particular place and time. Such culturally acceptable patterned arrangements become formal icons. Any digression from the cultural template (the norm) would be seen as inappropriate. We, in the Western Christian tradition, might not know immediately why the Madonna is never shown wearing anything other than robes of red and blue. Yet were we to see a representation of a woman clothed in a green and orange ski suit holding the Christ Child, we probably would assume that she was not the Madonna because she was not “properly” attired. In other words, we do not have to know that robes are a chronological marker or that in Christian iconography red and blue are symbolic of love and truth, twin virtues of the Madonna, to know that red and blue robes have some “meaning” that allows us to identify her. Thus, we can define meaning as the inherent culturally accepted content of the icons. While not everyone in the society may know the icons’ meaning, all will recognize them as being meaningful.

But when style and meaning are pulled apart and half of the pair discarded, what is retained is either archaism or a continuing tradition. (Picasso’s use of African mask forms is a modern example of archaism). Archaisms frequently appear as “garbled” images such as those illustrated by Rowe in his 1971 commentary on the subject. In contrast, a continuing belief maintains the meaning of an image while its original style may be disregarded.

Cupisnique art and Moche art are stylistically distinct; no one familiar with the artistic repertoires of the two cultures could mistake the Moche Spider Decapitator for the Cupisnique one. Yet, the fact that there was a Spider Decapitator in both cultures indicates some commonality of thought: a continuing belief in decapitation. Moreover, it was not simply the broad notion of decapitation that was passed on, but rather the understanding that at least five specific supernatural individuals were involved in that activity. Why were those five envisioned as head takers and what characteristics made them especially appropriate for the role? While at this time it is not possible to explain why most of the creatures were selected, some interesting hypotheses may be put forward concerning the spider.

Although Cupisnique iconographic contexts are extremely limited, those of the Moche are more extensive and allow for reasonable extrapolation. In Moche society militarism involved capturing prisoners of war on the battlefield, stripping them of their defenses, binding them to prohibit escape, and taking them to the home base of the captors. At that point the blood of the bound prisoners was taken and subsequently consumed by aristocratic participants in an elaborate ceremony (Donnan 1978:158–173). From the abundant depictions of warfare and prisoner sacrifice that are found in Moche iconography, clearly the objective of warfare was not the killing of the opponent, but rather his capture for ultimate ritual sacrifice (C. Donnan, personal communication 1990). Parallel behavior by spiders makes them particularly appropriate for characterization as sacrificers. Their propensity for capturing prey, binding it live with cord-like elements, and gradually removing its vital fluids
Figure 15. Moche gold bead crafted in the form of a spider with a human head on its back. Excavated from the Tomb of the “Old Lord of Sipán,” Sipán, Lambayeque Valley. Museo Bruning, Lambayeque. Courtesy C. Donnan, photographer.

well may have been what prompted the Moche to select the spider as the decapitator par excellence from the Cupisnique repertoire.

Recent archaeological excavations at the Moche site of Sipán in the Lambayeque Valley have placed this Spider Decapitator activity in an actual context. Possessions of the royalty interred in the Sipán tombs include metal bells and backflaps—battle accoutrements of Moche warriors—that are ornamented with images of Supernatural Spider Decapitators (Figure 14; Alva 1988, 1990). In the oldest Sipán tomb found, the deceased was buried wearing a necklace of 10 large lenticular golden beads that were crafted in the form of a spider on its web. What is especially noteworthy about these spider beads is that a human head appears on the animal’s back (Figure 15; Alva 1990: 4). The similarity between the iconography of these beads and that of the Cupisnique Supernatural Spider Decapitators with the bound human heads upon their back is striking and strongly implies an equivalency (compare Figure 15 with Figure 6). The motivation for using the spider as a decapitator in Moche iconography has been argued above, but since the origin of the motif is undeniably Cupisnique, a similar activity could well have existed in that ancestral society.

Understanding the impetus for characterizing the other creatures as decapitators must await further analysis, as must consideration of the creatures that do not remove heads. There are no felines, foxes, dogs, serpents, sea lions, or any other creatures involved in the action besides those examined in either Moche or Cupisnique iconography. This parallelism further argues that the same inventory of decapitators in both Cupisnique and Moche art was not mere coincidence. Were it so, one would expect a randomness in the selection of the creatures involved. Clearly, a Cupisnique ideological legacy is present in Moche art (also see Cordy-Collins 1988). Undeniably, the Moche were more than collectors of antiques—they were heirs to a belief that they subscribed to in practice.

CONCLUSION

The Decapitator theme in Moche art had its beginnings in the old Cupisnique tradition of head takers. Although the two cultures occupied some of the same territory, the process by which the Moche came by their Cupisnique heritage is unknown. Even if the Moche consciously had collected Cupisnique antiques as Rowe suggests, the close parallel in decapitator representations firmly implies
that Moche artists did not merely have Cupisnique objects with which to continue the tradition of their predecessors. Not only did they understand the Cupisnique belief complex, they practiced it as well. How this belief complex was transmitted is a question of paramount importance, but one that requires dependable means of refining the chronologies of Cupisnique and Moche decapitator iconography and, therefore, cannot be addressed at the current stage of research.

The Decapitator theme in Cupisnique art imparts a powerful visual impact; the potency of the imagery transcends the centuries so that even at a remove of more than two millennia, one feels the vitality of the ancient ideology. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that a culture closer in time to the original cultists—people who drew upon a common heritage—would have venerated the early faith. Such spiritual devotion is clear in the artistic creations of Moche society, a people whose veneration of the Cupisnique faith was both eloquent and tenacious.

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**NOTE**

1 All the metal examples of Spider Decapitators come either from Loma Negra in the Piura Valley or from Sipán in the Lambayeque Valley (see Figure 1).

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