Spiders and Spider Decapitators in Moche Iconography

Identification from the Contexts of Sipán, Antecedents and Symbolism

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Abstract

The Tombs of Sipán in northern Peru provided some of the first contextualized Moche metallic objects depicting anthropomorphized spider beings with decapitated heads and tumi knives in their hands, as well as more naturalized spider representations. I begin this chapter by tracing the visual theme of such naturalized spider and anthropomorphized Spider Decapitator images from the preceding Formative period Cupisnique culture through the Moche system of representation, as found at other sites such as Loma Negra and Huaca Cao Viejo. I draw extensively on the work of Burger and Salazar-Burger, as well as Alana Cordy-Collins. From the numerous and varied representations in the tombs at Sipán, I identify the spider according to species, arguing that it represents a common north coast orb-weaving spider, Argiope argentata. The chapter concludes with a broad discussion of the symbolic qualities of A. argentata that the Moche perhaps recognized and referenced in their incorporation of the species into the material goods of such high-status elite burials as the Tombs of Sipán.

Following the discovery of Tombs 1 and 2, in 1987 the excavations at Sipán unearthed the elaborate funerary remains of a third high-ranking individual known as the Old Lord of Sipán. This Tomb 3 individual had been buried with an extensive assortment of metal, shell, ceramic, and feather objects (Figure 14.1). Many of the objects featured stylized zoomorphic images modeled into ornaments and effigies. One of the most elaborate and significant burial ornaments was a pectoral of ten gold, biconvex beads. Each piece of the necklace bore the representation of a spider suspended in the center of its web with its abdomen transformed into a human head (Figure 14.2). The reverse side features a low-relief spiral comprised of three serpentine birds (Figure 14.3).

From a detailed analysis of these particular components of Tomb 3 at Sipán, I have determined that these objects were meant to represent a particular species of spider, Argiope argentata (Figure 14.4). Based on its particular characteristics, I would argue that this spider species was modeled in both natural and figural manner on the ceramic and metal objects from Sipán, as well as on objects from other Moche sites. Such spiders further appear upon the facades of Moche ceremonial centers.

Not surprisingly, the species A. argentata also likely provided the natural model for one set of spider representations in the preceding Cupisnique tradition.

In order to understand the basis for this spider identification, and its meaning for the context of the Old Lord, I will first assess the iconographic data of Cupisnique and Moche spider representations. I will then examine the natural characteristics of A. argentata in greater detail in order to evince the correspondences between the iconographic forms and natural models. Such analyses should provide for a better understanding of the greater symbolic significance of the spider representations in Moche iconography, most notably those associated with the funerary assemblages at Sipán. Along with other natural models, the spider A. argentata references a fundamental system of duality and serves as a symbol of fecundity and cyclic regeneration. Through its representation, the Moche further recall concepts of the center, of inversion, and of symbolic dualities. Thus, I will conclude with a more in-depth assessment of each of these qualities and visual metaphors provided by the spider, which actively participated in the symbolic universe of the Early Moche culture.
**Figure 14.1.** View of Tomb 3 during excavation, Sipán. Photograph by Walter Alva.

**Figure 14.2.** Spider beads in gold from Tomb 3, Sipán. Photograph by Christopher B. Donnan and Donna McClelland.

**Figure 14.3.** Back view of a spider bead, Tomb 3, Sipán. Photograph by Christopher B. Donnan and Donna McClelland.
The Iconographic Record
In the iconography of the Cupisnique and Moche cultures, spider and Spider Decapitator images appear on objects associated with elite funerary contexts at sites such as Limoncarro, Sipán, and Loma Negra. They further occur on the facades of important monuments such as Garagay, Huaca de la Luna (Figure 14.5), and Huaca Cao Viejo. These icons attest to the fundamental role of spiders in the religious systems of the north coast, constituting one of the links between the Formative period tradition and the Moche style of the Early Intermediate period.

In contrast to the earlier Cupisnique forms, the naturalistic tendency of Early Moche art likely benefited from the perfecting of ceramic and metalworking techniques. The Moche visual system thus seemingly reorganized the previous north coast iconological system through an increased emphasis on specific zoological models, structuring a greater empirical system or cosmological discourse based on tangible forms in nature.

To understand better, within this discourse, the represented spider forms in Early Moche visual culture and their associated meanings in the funerary assemblage of the Old Lord of Sipán, I begin with the known Formative period Cupisnique examples.

Cupisnique Spiders
In 1982, Lucy Salazar-Burger and Richard Burger undertook a study of arachnid figures in north coast Formative period iconography. The objects consisted of a series of six stone receptacles that were decorated in low relief with a similar theme of natural and anthropomorphized arachnids (Salazar-Burger and Burger 1982:213). By remaining largely absent from the highland Chavín system of representation, these arachnid figures provided a significant model by which to demarcate a more localized north coast visual repertoire, termed Cupisnique by Larco Hoyle. Yet as Salazar-Burger and Burger note, the spider images themselves present stylistic correspondences with Chavin de Huántar that are notable and suggest a mutual contemporaneity (ibid.).

According to the investigators, the Spider Decapitator in particular “symbolizes one of the deities of the Cupisnique ideological system, whose role we believe would have been to mediate in the ritual activities of the fertility and fecundity of the earth” (ibid:238). In a more
recent publication, Salazar-Burger and Burger (2000) propose that the Spider Decapitator may even represent the principal deity of a Cupisnique pantheon. As such, “this figure does not appear in the friezes uncovered at Huaca de los Reyes, perhaps because the access was limited to mythical stories and mysteries, and thereby the principal deities were not represented on the facades, as we see in the case of Chavín de Huantar” (2000:37).³

In their analysis, Salazar-Burger and Burger organized the Cupisnique images into the two distinct groups—spiders and Spider Decapitators—depicted on numerous stone objects. For example, the spider figures appear on the Larco Plate and the Dumbarton Oaks Vase (Figures 14.6, 14.7); the Spider Decapitator images appear on the Dumbarton Oaks Plate and the Brooklyn Museum Plate (Figures 14.8, 14.9). Salazar-Burger and Burger (1982) also make reference to monumental images such as the petroglyph at Alto de las Guitarras and the Middle Temple Frieze 3 at Garagay (see also Ravines 1984). In these two cases, the features are arachnoid and anthropomorphic, respectively. I would add to this corpus two Cupisnique ceramics, one reported by Walter Alva (1986:110, fig. 61) and the other by Alana Cordy-Collins (2001:27, fig. 2.5).

**Figure 14.6.** Spider with two heads etched on a stone bowl. Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera, Lima. Redrawn from Salazar-Burger and Burger 1982, Figure 2.

**Figure 14.7.** Spiders with two heads etched on a stone bowl. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington, D.C. Redrawn from Salazar-Burger and Burger 1982, Figure 4.
The spider images modeled upon the two stone receptacles display a bisymmetrical design achieved by adding a second head to the opposing end (Figure 14.6, 14.7). This tripartite representation alters the anatomy of the arachnid (cephalothorax, abdomen) to that similar to an insect (head, thorax, and abdomen). The intention was likely to establish the image’s signified “center.” This relates in intent to the four-part crosses incised on the Cupisnique bottle reported by Walter Alva (1986:110, fig. 61), which also correspond to the concept of the “center.”

In contrast, the Spider Decapitator images on these stone containers exhibit a diagonal or vertical contraposition of human and animal attributes (Salazar-Burger and Burger 1982). The human side is depicted in profile, while the animal is seen as if from above (Figure 14.8). On the Dumbarton Oaks Plate, the “net full of heads” element constitutes the center of the figure (Figure 14.8). The dual organization of the spider and Spider Decapitator images thus appears to have been well-defined within the north coast Cupisnique tradition, and it continues into the Early Moche style.

Salazar-Burger and Burger (1982) address studies of Moche representations performed by Lavallée (1970) and Larco Hoyle (1938) that identify such spider representations as *Mygalia* sp., or tarantulas based largely on the placement of the chelicera and the species’ large size and great speed. Yet the researchers also turned to ethnohistoric data provided by Polo de Ondegardo, Pablo José de Arriaga, and Vega Bazán, who describe the use of large web-building spiders in Andean divinatory rites. Based on such accounts and those of Cayón (1971), Salazar-Burger and Burger (1982) aptly associated the appearance of spiders with rain.

From a subsequent visual analysis of the images, I further support their assertion regarding the masculine nature of the Spider Decapitator. This masculine nature may be defined by the relationship of the spider with *Strombus* and serpent images, as observable upon the Brooklyn Museum Plate (Figure 14.9). From their placement within the main arachnid figure, such images suggest phallic and seminal symbols. The web-semen-rain metaphor then acquires meaning in the context of agrarian fecundity, which the spider images reference.

Given the very determined stylization of the spider images, I would suggest that the Cupisnique system already sought to represent a particular species of spider.

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**Figure 14.8.** Anthropomorphic spider holding a human head. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington, D.C. Redrawn from Salazar-Burger and Burger 1982, Figure 8.

**Figure 14.9.** Anthropomorphic spider. The Brooklyn Museum. Redrawn from Salazar-Burger and Burger 1982, Figure 11.
added to give the spider an unreal or fantastic appearance. One false-necked, incised vessel shows an idealized spider with a divine face in the abdomen (Figure 14.11). Resembling the gold-beaded pectoral from Sipán, I would suggest that this spider image depicts the species *Argiope argentata*, or possibly *Gasteracantha*, based on the facial representation within the abdomen. Only one sculpted ceramic bottle of Early Moche style actually represents *Argiope argentata* in naturalistic form (Figure 14.12). In later phases of Moche ceramics, the representations of spiders are less frequent and appear associated with mythic scenes or as marginal motifs on certain vessel necks (Figure 14.13).

**Moche Ceramics**

Various Early and Middle Moche ceramics represent idealized spiders in a manner similar to those images of the preceding Cupisnique style, with a third body part often

**Figure 14.10.** Spider *Ar*giope *trifasciata*. Photograph by Lynette Schimming.

in the monumental and portable visual programs. Without venturing greater analysis here upon these early Cupisnique representations, I would argue that the Larco Plate and Dumbarton Oaks Vase display images of the spider *Argiope trifasciata* (Figures 14.6, 14.7, 14.10), although the agnathic face that composes the inferior part of the Dumbarton Oaks Plate figure is notably similar in form and design to the abdomen of *Argiope argentata* (Figure 14.4). Furthermore, the geometric border in the form of a Z recalls the webs made by spiders of the genus *Argiope* (Figure 14.8), to which I will return below.

This diversity in species selection and representation in Cupisnique iconography suggests the existence of an early system of classification of a depth still unknown to modern scholarship. As a result, I will not propose a direct one-to-one correspondence between these Cupisnique forms and the succeeding Moche spider images. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, the structure of dual representation and the shared visual features remain significant, and the Moche undoubtedly referenced this earlier tradition in manifesting their new visual and symbolic system.
Various Early Moche globular bottles display a painted frontal image of the Spider Decapitator. For example, a very elaborate, early sculpted bottle from Vicús represents this spider deity. Although the arms are now missing, the spider figure likely once held a knife and decapitated head in either hand (Figure 14.14). Another stirrup spout bottle looted from the area of Sipán illustrates the spider deity in profile. The figure carries a knife and decapitated head in its hands and has arachnid legs extending to the sides. Under the belt appears a rattle, or bell, an object which may bear close analogy with the multisectioned abdomen of A. argentina, based on the Tomb 3 and Tomb 1 examples of rattles and backflaps from Sipán (Figure 14.15). In Late Moche fineline ceramics, the Spider Decapitator participates in complex scenes of combat and possibly defeat before the anthropomorphic deity Wrinkle Face. Yet another ceramic vessel depicts at least five individuals with spider characteristics accompanying the Rayed Deity as he ascends a ladder between two levels (Figure 14.13).

**Moche Monumental Facades**

Spider images have also been recorded on the facades of some of most significant excavated Moche buildings.

**FIGURE 14.13.** Fineline painting of the Presentation Theme individuals. Drawing by Donna McClelland.
For example, the third level of the Huaca de la Luna platform complex presents polychrome reliefs of stylized spiders, likely Spider Decapitators. Each spider figure is composed of a central body with two schematized heads to either end, each head distinct from the other. The heads that face toward the west possess eyes, chelicerae, and antennae. The opposing heads to the east have only two pairs of chelicerae. The legs are distributed in four groups above and below, totaling fourteen in all. On the inferior part, certain legs are replaced by hands that carry a knife and an undefined object, possibly a head (Figure 14.5).

A largely destroyed mural relief, similar to that described above and in a relative location with respect to the architectural layout, was uncovered at Huaca Cao Viejo (Franco, Gálvez, and Vásquez 2001). The spiders that appear on this structure have four pairs of extended legs and zigzag bands across the abdomen (Figure 14.16). As such, they closely recall the species *Argiope trifasciata* (Figure 14.10). Images of the Spider Decapitator also appear on the mural reliefs at Huaca Cao Viejo. The northern mural of the ceremonial chamber located on the upper platform is divided into two panels that depict figures with bilobed ears, half-moon crowns, and four groups of three spider legs. In their right hands, the figures carry a staff ending in the head of a condor while in the left hand they hold a decapitated head. The colors are distinct on each figure (Figure 14.17).

**Metal Objects**

Metallic ornaments from the site of Loma Negra in Piura represent spider figures in a rather realistic manner. An earplug of silver and gold features a spider on its web, and a rectangular gold-and-silver nose pendant was decorated with six spiders of a similarly represented species (Jones 2001:212, fig. 2). Some perforated plates display three-dimensional, bound metal spiders and probably were part of a royal standard or adornment. These
FIGURE 14.16. Mural of a spider being holding a sacrificial knife, Huaca Cao Viejo. Photograph by author.

FIGURE 14.17. Mural of a spider being holding a sacrificial knife and a human head, Huaca Cao Viejo. Photograph by author.
same spiders appear on similar pieces made of copper. In all such examples from Loma Negra, the number of abdominal sections varies and does not necessarily correspond to the natural number in a zoological species. Nevertheless, these objects of relatively similar provenance evidently represent *Argiope argentata* based on their form and dual composition in gold and silver.

Other objects from Loma Negra, such as nose pendants and discs, represent the Spider Decapitator in a manner similar to those from Sipán. A half-moon copper crown depicts a divine head in the center with two Spider Decapitators in profile to either side. This image recalls that of the backflaps and bells at Sipán, described below.

**Sipán**

The funerary context of the Old Lord of Sipán in Tomb 3 offers the most singular and clear examples of spider representations on the ornaments of elite personages of Moche society (Alva 1994; Alva and Donnan 1993). These include the pectoral of ten biconvex pieces of gold, mentioned above. Each piece of the necklace displays a spider figure centered on its web, and each spider exhibits the image of a human head on its abdomen (Figure 14.2). Each human head is adorned with a collar of nine beads, which coincide with the number of body segments of the spider *A. argentata*. The web is composed of seven concentric circles and twenty crossing strands. The reverse side displays a spiral of six interlinked spokes. Three of the spokes resemble serpent-birds with serrated backs, while the other three are plain bands. The interior space between the two halves contains three bells, which could represent spider eggs but also serve as rattles (Figure 14.3).

There are no other recorded representations of such spiders within the other burial contexts of the funerary platform at Sipán. Nevertheless, there are images of the so-called Spider Decapitator. In the funerary context of the Old Lord, for example, the excavators recuperated two groups of ten gold and silver bells, along with a backflap made of gold, all depicting a similar figure (Figure 14.18). The figure illustrated has bilobed ears and a ferocious face displaying fangs. In one hand he holds a knife, while in the other he carries a decapitated...
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head. This individual is further adorned by a semicircular headdress with the face of an owl in the center, a crenulated belt, and a shirt of longitudinal bands. From the shoulders and belt emerge four diagonal pairs of spider legs (Cordy-Collins 1992). Careful observation suggests that the X form and transverse segments of these defined extremities resemble those characteristic of the spider *A. argentata*. Additionally, there exists a close similarity between the shape of these bells and backflaps—a semicircular design lined with spheres—and the broad, flaring, multilobed abdomen of the spider *Argiope argentata* (Figure 14.4).

In the other funerary contexts at Sipán, elite individuals possessed bells and backflaps similar to the images from the tomb of the Old Lord. One looted funerary context recovered at the beginning of the project contained gold and copper bells of an undefined number, along with a large gold backflap, some of which clearly featured the Spider Decapitator (Alva and Donnan 1993). In a similar manner, this spider deity was depicted in the well-known funerary context of the Lord of Sipán on two gold bells, two backflaps (gold and silver), and a small, half-moon crown of gold. A context of lesser rank, Tomb 7, excavated in the same funerary platform, pertaining to a pair of adolescents. It contained, among other offerings, a stirrup spout bottle with a high-relief decoration of an anthropomorphic being in profile holding a knife in one hand and a captured bird in the other—clearly a decapitator. The figure also carries a bell with an inscribed face and exhibits appendages in the form of spider legs.

The funerary contexts at Sipán thus actively reinforce certain conceptions regarding the symbolic significance of certain spider species, most notably *Argiope argentata*. The dual representation of spiders in Moche iconography as naturalistic and anthropomorphic beings remains consistent from the Cupisnique tradition. Yet it is the manner of representation in the funerary assemblage of the Old Lord that provides the most concrete information for identifying this particular species of spider. It visually demonstrates the correspondence between the natural model and the symbolic role that the spider assumes in Moche culture.

In Book 4 of *Historia de nuevo mundo* ([1653] 1956), Father Cobo observed that the spiders in the Andean world differ in size, color, and shape, and that certain medium-sized spiders appear to represent the shape of a human face on their abdomen, though varying in design. Although brief, this statement indicates the attention that certain spider species received in the greater Andean region based on their resemblance to the human face. This feature most certainly identifies spiders of the genus *Argiope*. Indeed, it seems that Father Cobo described the same image that the Moche expressed in the pectoral beads associated with the Old Lord of Sipán.

**Entomological Information**

Spiders are arthropods, meaning they possess eight legs, and their bodies are clearly divided into two parts, cephalothorax and abdomen. They possess a pair of pedipalps near the mouth, and two chelicerae that serve to inject venom. On the inferior part of the abdomen are the spinnerets that produce the silk with which they create their webs, which permit the spiders to hunt prey, store food, and wrap eggs.

Although vagrant spiders that live in semisubterranean burrows and capture victims by ambush do exist, sedentary spiders live on woven webs suspended above the ground. These spiders create such webs first by stringing a line between two objects and then by creating a star with lines running around the edges and uniting at the center. The spiders then trace over the exterior edges and radiating lines, completing the design with an adhesive spiral running from the outer edge toward the center of the web.

In addition to capturing insects, the spider web serves to condense water in the form of drops. Using this trait to their advantage, spiders may lay dozens of eggs wrapped in sacks of thread, which further resemble the water drops. In a few days, hundreds of small spiders can cover large distances and will establish themselves in a new place and produce new webs.

The venom of spiders generally kills its prey. Indeed, the venom literally dissolves the insides of the captured prey so that the spider can directly ingest the liquefied food source. This natural act may have been considered a powerful metaphor for ritual sacrifice in the north coast agrarian societies—and a symbolic factor in Moche spider representations (Cordy-Collins 1992). Certainly,
the venomous and predatory character of such spiders was an important component in Moche ideology. Such spiders, however, also provide a positive, natural control on insect populations, in particular those destructive to crops. This aspect of agricultural protector presumably further defines their symbolic role in Moche culture, reflecting the spider’s dual role in the natural world as both sacrificers and protectors.

Toward an Identification
The spider *Argiope argentata* is a common species across nearly all of the Americas and is found regularly along the coast of Peru. Other species of *Argiope*, such as *A. trifasciata*, occur at higher altitudes. Similar to other populations of spiders on the north coast of Peru, the populations of *Argiope argentata* rise notably during the recurring climatological phenomenon of El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO) (see Polis et al. 1997). During such times, the spiders proliferate in the lower valleys, where their populations are usually scarce.

Not only is the species *A. argentata* common to the north coast, with its presence corresponding significantly to the dramatic effect of the El Niño phenomenon, but the physical appearance of *A. argentata* is also very striking. The spider’s coloration literally defines its two halves: the thorax and upper half of the abdomen shimmer, while the lower half of the abdomen bears points and lines of yellow, black, and silver. The predominant color on the ventral side is black, with a transverse band of yellow across the abdomen. The spider’s abdomen is multisectional, with nine conical protuberances. This combination of colors and sections on the abdomen often resembles a face (Figure 14.4). The extremities are yellow, with occasional dark transverse zones. When resting on its web during the day, the spider positions its legs in two opposing pairs to form an X (Figure 14.4). In this position, the spider’s head always faces downward. Finally, *Argiope* species weave elaborate webs with stabilimenta, which are portions of the web redressed in zigzag lines in a manner like lace. These zigzagging stabilimenta may be circular or take a radial form in the shape of an X. Either way, they present identifiable and significant visual designs.

Another genus of spider that also possesses a multi-lobed abdomen resembling the design of a human face is *Gasterocantha*. Its voluminous abdomen nearly hides its small legs and head, and its web is often symmetrical and lacking zigzagging stabilimenta. Therefore, it seems that despite the visual resemblance to a human face, *Gasterocantha* are less likely to be the spiders drawn upon in Moche iconography. Rather, the Moche appear to have referenced quite exclusively the species *Argiope argentata* for very particular reasons.

The notable characteristics of *Argiope argentata*—its coloration, form, and ecology—permit the creation of certain complex metaphors of cosmological and cosmogenic principles in Moche culture. Unlike any other natural model, this spider provides multiple symbolic concepts of relevant use for the complex Moche visual system of representation. As noted by Father Cobo, these principles remain accessible to modern scholars based on the continued presence and observable nature of the actual species on the north coast of Peru. By highlighting the significant natural qualities of *Argiope argentata*, I will thus pursue the symbolic nature of their representation in Moche iconography.

The Concept of the Center
On the Cupisnique stone receptacles, such as the Larco Plate and the Dumbarton Oaks Vase, the spider image is conceived as a central, circular body with symmetrical heads and feet to the sides and ends (Figures 14.6, 14.7). In the Spider Decapitator images, such as that on the Dumbarton Oaks Plate, the centers indicated by the nets over their backs (Figure 14.8). As such, the spiders, spider webs, and spider deities in Cupisnique iconography are symbolic as “centers.”

On the pectoral beads from the assemblage of the Old Lord of Sipán, the spider at the center of the web suggests the same concept. The association of the spider to the spiral likely refers to the dynamics of these centers as generators of the universe (Figure 14.2). The spiral suggests kinetic energy, as visible in a whirlwind of air, whirlpools of water, and snail shells (Harth-Terre 1976). Sometimes the spiral is stylized with fish or bird combinations (Figure 14.3), signifying through these joined elements the dynamic interdependency of the worlds above and below.

The spider *A. argentata* refers to this same principle through the spiral shape of its web, which unites the worlds at its center. The center is visually reinforced by the zigzag stabilimenta in the form of an X. Indeed, the
web designs of *A. argentata* are very complex, emanating from the spider’s body like a primordial substance. The spider rests during the day in the center of this web, suspended between the earth and sky. Its four pairs of legs form another cross or X shape, defining the concept of an “axis mundi.” As such, the spider is the mediating nexus between two worlds.

Furthermore, if the identification of *A. argentata* for the Spider Decapitator in Moche iconography is valid, then the symbolism of the center transfers from the animal to the divine figure and to the carriers of these images. These individuals thus reflect the “center” of the social organization. It is for this reason that the bells and backflaps, which recall the multilobed abdomen of *A. argentata*, appear in the funerary contexts of the highest-ranking individuals at Sipán.

**Concepts of Duality and Inversion**

The coloration of *A. argentata* and its positions on the web, with the silver half of its body toward the earth and the yellow half toward the sky, present another clear visual metaphor connecting the binary roles of earth and sky. Also, the colors silver and yellow closely relate to the duality of gold and silver expressed in the funerary complex of the Old Lord of Sipán. In Tomb 3, the Spider Decapitator appears on bells and backflaps of both gold and silver, situated one above the other. However, despite this display of metalwork proficiency, as well as the naturalism of Moche art, no object displays a spider modeled half in silver and half in gold. There always thus remains one feature to distinguish a spider image from the natural model, such as a lesser number of protruding elements.

In addition, in the natural world *A. argentata* rests at the center of its web and faces downward. Yet on the pectoral beads of the Old Lord of Sipán, the spider figure is depicted with its head facing upward (Figure 14.2). The spider assumes this same position on the nose guard from Loma Negra. I would argue that this upward-facing direction was perhaps intended to express an inversion of the natural model. Other contexts and motifs support this concept. For example, in Early Moche tombs at the site of Dos Cabezas in the Jequetepeque Valley, Donnan and Cock recovered two associated vessels that represent the Andean condor and vulture, respectively (Donnan 2003). The colors of each piece are contrary to the natural model, constituting an opposition (*Vultur gryphus* has coloration that is the inverse of *Sarcoramphus papa*). The duality of the natural model is thus reinforced by the inversion of these colors in the visual representation.

**Concepts of Regeneration and Fertility**

Various species of spider, especially *Argiope argentata*, proliferate during the climatic phenomenon known as El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO), spreading from the lomas to the lower valleys (Polis et al. 1997). The notorious presence of these spiders at these times directly relates them to the universal cycle of regeneration. During an El Niño event, the landscape of the north coast returns to one of overabundance: pasture land grows in the desert, streams run through normally dry quebradas, and lakes and marshes are reborn. The event thus defines a grand cycle of regeneration. Notably, according to Meneses and Chero (Alva 1994, 1998), the impact of El Niño events on the architectural structure at Sipán determined the sequence of construction phases on the funerary platform.

The newborn spiders—transported by the wind while suspended from their threads—would have further constituted a clear metaphor of the cycle of rains and dispersal of life (Cayón 1971:137). These floating spiders appear in spectacular quantities during El Niño events, as they do during the annual humid season. Hundreds of newborn spiders emerge from eggs resembling water droplets. They are then elevated into the air in the manner of clouds, only to later fall back to the earth like rain. The spiders are thus not only prognosticators of rain by their actions, analogous to the fluvial cycle, but their proliferation during the annual rainy season also relates them to the seasonal cycles of fecundity and fertility. I recall here the research by Cayón (1971), in which he demonstrates that in some Andean communities the spiders are announcers of the coming rains.

The Cupisnique images, such as upon the Dumbar-ton Oaks Plate, also relate to agricultural fecundity, representing vegetal elements in association with the Spider Decapitator (Salazar-Burger and Burger 1982). The fanged mouths to the sides of the central figure could be maize kernels (Figure 14.8). If one considers that maize possesses hair-like fibers that cover teeth-like seeds, then the vegetal and human “hairs” and “heads” are located at the “center” of the spider deity. Decapitation then
takes on an agricultural connotation: the heads within
the nets and hands of the Spider Decapitator symbol-
ize at the same time seeds, harvested fruits, sacrificed
heads, and spider eggs within the web (Cordy-Collins
1992). All present metaphors that interweave life with
dead, nature with society, and planting with harvesting
in a ritual agrarian context.

Cosmological Parallels
In the context of the Old Lord of Sipán, there exists
a relation between the necklace of the spiders and a
necklace of a similar type that represents feline heads
(Figure 14.19). The feline faces are modeled on the front
of ten spherical beads that host spirals of serpents on the
reverse sides. The beads of these two pectorals thus agree
in the number of pieces, material, and the symbol of a
spiral on their reverse sides. In the funerary assemblage,
the necklace of spiders was located over the bundle,
whereas the collar of felines was placed over the indi-
vidual’s chest. I would argue that the represented feline
is an ocelot (Leopardus pardalis), given that the species
possesses colors and pelage designs similar to A. argen-
tata. Their symbolic association would thus refer to the
analogies of color and form between these two species.
The abdomen of the spider may even resemble the head
of the feline.

Considering that the feline in Andean myths is often
related to rain, lightning, and earthquakes, its associa-
tion with the spider confirms the parallels between
these two species, which define cosmological levels

Figure 14.19. Feline head beads, gold with shell inlay, from Tomb 3, Sipán. Photograph by Christopher B. Donnan and
Donna McClelland.
related to fecundity and the power over life. In this light, the feline features of the Spider Decapitator ought to be reconsidered.

Finally, the position of the pectoral of spider beads over the bundle of the Old Lord returns us to the funerary context of Tomb 3 (Figure 14.1). The spider beads rest over the complete funerary bundle. Through such placement, the bundle wrapped in a shroud of threads may serve as an apt metaphor for the captured prey of the spider, wrapped in silk. The spiders—as regenerators, protectors, and destroyers—thus conduct the cycle of life and death. The symbol of the spider in this discussion then terminates where it began, with the burial assemblage of the Old Lord of Sipán.

Notes

1. Translation by Kimberly L. Jones.
2. Translation by Kimberly L. Jones.

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