Chapter 15

When and Where Did the Nasca Proliferous Style Emerge?

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INTRODUCTION

Nasca art and culture were among the first of Peru’s great indigenous civilizations to be defined. In the 19th century, looted specimens of Nasca art were already reaching the major museums of the world, where their distinctive style, artistic quality, and charm attracted the attention of the scholars who would become the first generation of professional archaeologists. In the 1880s, young Max Uhle was working for the Museum für Völkerkunde, in Berlin, when he saw his first Nasca ceramics. Vowing to eventually discover their source, in February, 1901 he became the first archaeologist to document a cemetery containing polychrome Nasca pottery, located in Peru’s south coast Ica Valley (Proulx 1970: 1–44; Silverman and Proulx 2002: 1–3).

Today, a great deal is known about the Nasca ceramic style, but the very early definition of this magnificent art has promoted the identification of similar traditions of art as “Nasca” as well. The purpose of this paper is to explore relations between the Nasca culture of the heartland’s Rio Grande de Nazca drainage and Ica Valley, other south coast valleys, and less known cultures of the far south coastal valleys in the Department of Arequipa [Endnote 1]. How closely related to Nasca were other art styles of the far south, and can they be aligned chronologically with the better known Nasca sequence? Was spectacular Nasca art primarily a donor to more modest cultural traditions, or did unknown cultures of the far south achieve as much expertise in material culture as their better known “cousins” of the south coast? Of course, at this early stage of inquiry our goals must be modest, but in the long run we may hope to gain better understandings of southern Peruvian art, iconography and culture, the absolute chronology, and perhaps even the meanings underlying long iconographic histories, using clues from their reinterpretations through successive and multicultural interactions and modifications.

The data base and subject of this paper is a set of unusual Proliferous Nasca style textiles, several examples of which have been published (Bennett 1954: fig. 72; Berenguer 1996: frontispiece; de Lavalle 1989: figs. 11, 12; Frame 1999: plates 20, 21, 22, 23; Goodman 1999: lot 214; d’Harcourt 1962: plate 7; Kajitani 1982: fig. 53; Reid undated: plate 10). Their iconography consistently differs in specific details
from much more abundant Nasca heartland ceramic iconography [Endnote 2]. Frame (1999: 296) also recognizes stylistic aberrations in these weavings and suggests that they may come from outside the Nasca heartland. In an earlier article (Haeberli 2001: 104–106) I described two such textiles (one is the same as Frame’s plate 21), both alleged to have been discovered in the Sihuas Valley, Department of Arequipa. The Proliferous Nasca style is securely dated to the later half of the Nasca sequence, but radiocarbon dates for these two unusual Proliferous Nasca style weavings place them into the range of dates obtained for Early Nasca textiles. Furthermore, this cross-dating is supported by the discovery of a locally made Nasca 3 style bowl (unfortunately fragmented) at cemetery 2 of La Chimba, a site in the Sihuas Valley. The surprising provenience and early dates for these textiles is the factor provoking me to undertake this complex description and comparison.

My hypothesis is that unusual Proliferous Nasca style textiles are not from the Nasca heartland in Ica or the Rio Grande de Nazca drainage, but from coastal Arequipa. Chronologically, they are not late Nasca but belong to the early Early Intermediate Period (EIP). The chronology places them centuries before a somewhat similar iconography appeared in the Nasca heartland. The significance of these textiles was unrecognized throughout most of the 20th century mainly due to the scarcity of radiocarbon dates and a lack of detailed comparative studies of iconography. I present a comparative analysis of selected iconographic features and details observed among these unusual Proliferous Nasca style textiles and Nasca heartland pottery iconography. Whenever possible and applicable I also include comparisons with iconography from Nasca and Topar´a textiles.

Unfortunately, none of the unusual Proliferous Nasca style textiles has verifiable provenience. So one of my objectives is to establish criteria for distinguishing these textiles from Nasca heartland artifacts based on iconographic details and select textile data. A second objective is to obtain additional radiocarbon dates to insert these textiles into the current temporal Central Andean chronology and more specifically the famous Berkeley Nasca pottery seriation (part of John Rowe’s master sequence discussed in the conclusion of this volume [editors’ comment]). A third objective considers the implications that will emerge regarding possible interactions between Arequipa and the Nasca heartland during the EIP, possibly shedding light on potential causes for the transition from Early or Monumental Nasca to Late or Proliferous Nasca iconography. The findings and conclusions reached must be considered preliminary since my sample, including 53 textiles, is small compared to the thousands of Nasca heartland pottery examples. Revisions will almost certainly be required as additional information, hopefully at least some based on archaeological excavations, becomes available. I alone am responsible for any errors.

INDICATIONS OF A FAR SOUTH COAST NASCA TRADITION

We must begin with some base line information about far south coast textiles that is relevant to the Early Intermediate Period. On 19 April 1997 I met with