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A Bird Bone Necklace from Amato, Acari Valley, Peru

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Abstract

This paper reports the recent discovery of a bird bone necklace from Amato, an Early Intermediate Period site located in the Acari Valley of Peru. The necklace was found in association with an approximately 60 year-old adult male, around whom had been buried several dozen headless human individuals of different sexes and ages, the likely victims of ritual sacrifice. The necklace was made from about 200 carpometacarpus bones of a small bird species that remains to be identified.

Résumé

Cet article rapporte la découverte récente d'un collier en os d'oiseau à Amato, un site datant de la Période Intermédiaire inférieure situé dans la vallée d'Acari, au Pérou. Le collier a été trouvé en association avec un homme d'environ 60 ans d'âge, autour duquel avaient été enterrés plusieurs douzaines d'individus acéphales, de sexes et d'âges différents, victimes probables d'un sacrifice rituel. Le collier est fabriqué d'environ 200 carpometacarpes, provenant d'un petit oiseau dont l'espèce qui n'a pas encore été identifié.

The interaction between humans and animals extends beyond the simple procurement of meat and animal products and the use of some animal species for labour and transportation. In addition to the well-known forms of animal exploitation (Browman 1989; Greenfield 1988; Wheeler Pires-Ferreira et al. 1976; Valdez and Valdez 1997; Wing 1977), certain species of animals may be endowed with symbolic value by various societies. Animals are not only frequently represented in works of art, but their remains occur frequently as burial offerings (Carmichael 1988; Rofes 2000; Sandweiss and Wing 1997; Valdez 2000). In this paper, I introduce the particular case of an unusual necklace made of many bird bones recently discovered at the Early Intermediate Period (EIP) site of Amato (circa AD 1 – 300).

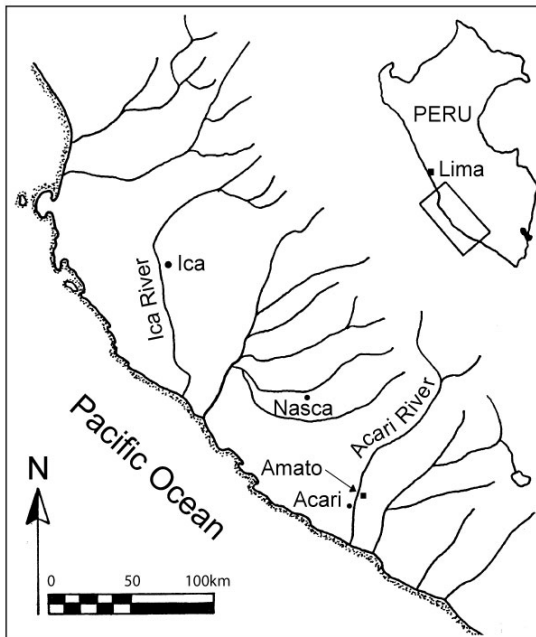


Figure 1: Location of Amato on the south coast of Peru.

The Archaeological Site of Amato

Amato is an archaeological site located in the Acari Valley, on the South Coast of Peru (Figure 1). It is a walled site established on an alluvial terrace on the east bank of the Acari River. Several additional large walls divide the site into different sections of unknown function. Among them there is a quadrangular enclosure at the centre of the site. Rowe (1963) was among the first to recognize Amato as being an EIP site. However, Amato was not formally excavated until the recent field studies carried out by the Acari Valley Archaeological Project in the summer of 2005. The site is in an arid zone and vegetation is limited to the area closest to the course of the river, which is about 400 metres to the west. Although the site has been looted, it still represents one of the best-preserved sites of the valley. Due largely to the arid conditions of the region, preservation of all archaeological materials, including organic remains, is excellent.

Excavations at Amato were conducted in order to assess its relative chronology and the function of the different spaces within the site. Because the walls that surround the site were interpreted by Rowe (1963) to represent “fortifications,” a goal of this project was to examine their presumed defensive function. Another objective was the recovery of burial remains in order to provide a basis for comparison with burials previously excavated from neighbouring sites (Valdez 2005a, 2005b).

During a survey carried out at Amato in 1987, worked pieces of *Spondylus*¹ shell and fragments of ceramic flutes were found at the central enclosure of the site. On the South Coast of Peru, flutes are not commonly found at archaeological sites, while *Spondylus* has long been recognized as an important ritual element across the Andes. The presence of both types of artifacts at Amato attested to the site's potential for archaeological investigation, particularly in light of our interest in mortuary remains. In the summer of 2005, a total of seven units, each 4m by 4m, were excavated inside the central enclosure of Amato.

The Mortuary Evidence

The archaeological material uncovered during our excavation consisted mostly of human remains, all of them in excellent condition. After the removal of several layers of sand, the human remains were found in all but one of the excavation units. The bodies had been thrown in awkward positions and piled in disarray at several locations within the central part of the site. While this treatment is unusual, the most intriguing characteristic of the skeletons is that they are missing their skulls. Cut marks were clearly evident on most cranial remaining cervical vertebra of these individuals, indicating that they had been decapitated. Several individuals had body parts that were mummified. A total of 44 headless individuals representing all age groups and both sexes were recovered during the field season; the remains of

additional individuals were uncovered but will not be excavated until next season.

Among the excavated skeletons, there was a single individual who had not been decapitated and whose remains had been treated in a very different manner. This was an adult male, about 60 years old, whose body had been placed in a seated posture, facing north, with knees flexed towards the chest and arms placed around the lower limbs so that the hands were placed upon the distal tibia. He had been wrapped in a plain textile and tied with a long rope. An empty gourd container, its mouth covered with a pottery sherd, was found at his feet, while many peanut pods lay at his right side. In front of this individual lay the prone, headless skeleton of an adult male of about 40 years old (Figure 2).

In addition, several animals were found near the seated individual. A half metre to the northeast were the mummified remains of a complete juvenile camelid with black wool, while to his right lay a group of four mummified young camelids with brown wool. Immediately to the east of the brown camelids, a group of fourteen headless human individuals had been thrown haphazardly into a pile. To the south of the seated individual, there were several worked pieces of *Spondylus* and *Spondylus* beads. The five camelids and the *Spondylus* artifacts appear to have represented ritual paraphernalia.

The Bird Bone Necklace

The evidence from Amato strongly indicates that this archaeological context represents a mass human sacrifice which involved decapitation. For reasons that are still under investigation, human decapitation and head-

¹ *Spondylus* is a marine shellfish that lives in the warm waters along the coast of Ecuador. Because of its ceremonial significance, *Spondylus* was highly traded by almost every ancient culture of the Andes.

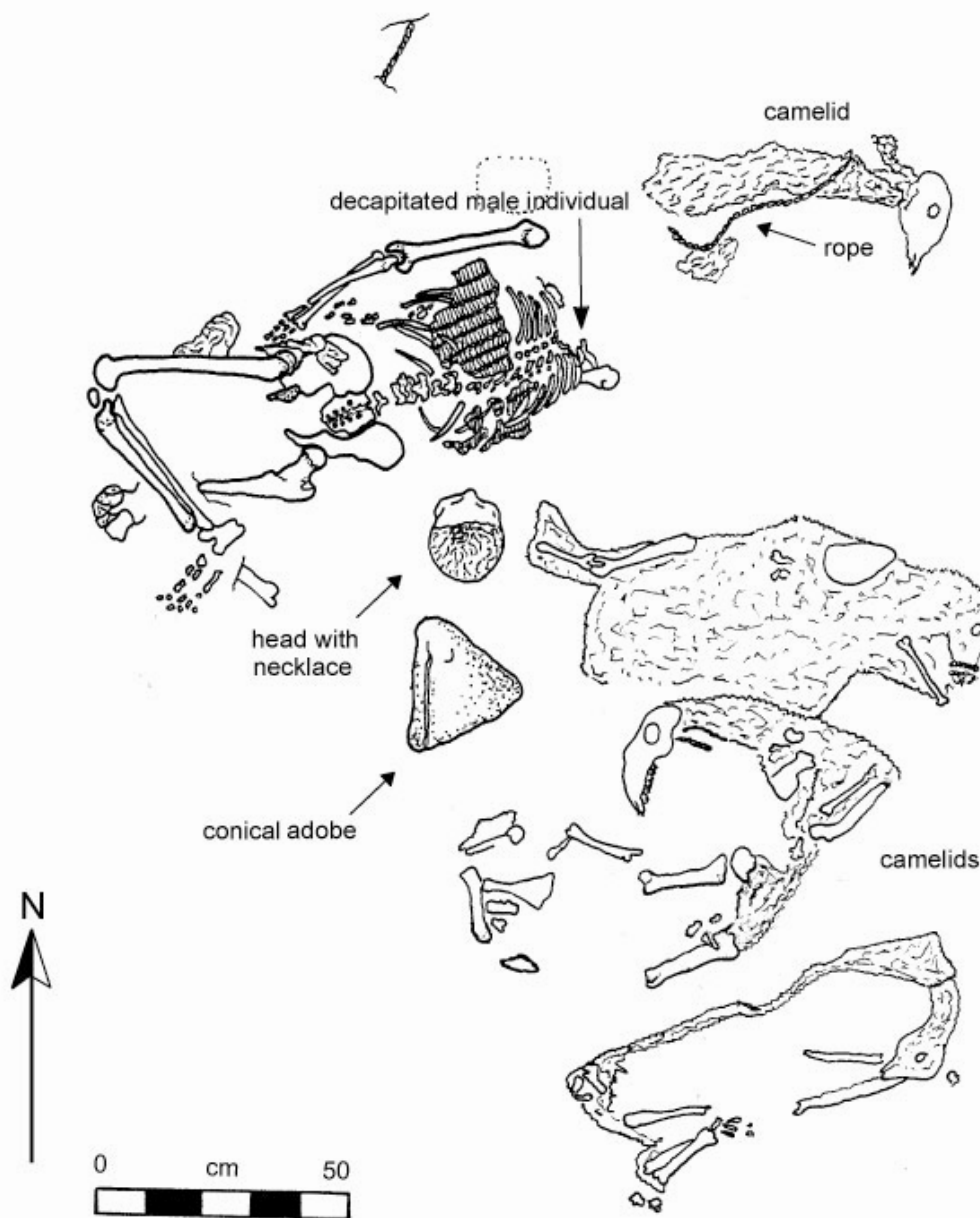


Figure 2: Plan view showing the individual with the bird bone necklace (centre) with a prone, decapitated individual in front of him (north), and mummified camelids to his right (the black camelid to the northeast, the brown camelids to the east and southeast).

taking were relatively common in this region during the EIP (Proulx 1989, 2001; Verano 1995, 2005). The presence of a single adult male who had not been decapitated and whose remains had been positioned and treated more carefully than the others suggests that he was of high rank. His apparently prominent position within the local population of Amato is corroborated by the presence of a previously unknown type of necklace around his neck (Plate 1).

The necklace was made from about 200 wing (carpometacarpus) bones of a bird species that remains to be identified. Each bone measures about 3.5 cm in length, with both ends of each bone exhibiting signs of scraping and polishing. Each had been threaded with a cotton string, and several sets of bones had been joined this way. These strings of bones had then been tied together at both ends, creating the necklace (Plate 2). Along the lower margin of the

necklace was a row of shell (*Choromytilus chorus*) beads. Most of the bones and the shell beads were found still joined with string, but soon after recovery, many came loose due to the fragile condition of some sections of string.

Shell bead necklaces have previously been found near looted burials at other sites of the Acari Valley. During the 2005 field season at Amato, hundreds of shell beads were found just outside the western wall of the central enclosure. However, no necklaces of any kind were found in the four adult burials excavated from the nearby, contemporary site of Huarato in 2004 (Valdez 2005a, 2005b). Consequently, it appears that the use of shell bead necklaces was restricted. Meanwhile, bird bone necklaces have not been reported anywhere in the South Coast region or in the Central Andes, making the finding from Amato unprecedented. For instance, the Nasca burial collection studied by Carmichael (1988) does not include a single bird bone necklace, although he did note the recovery of a bird bone whistle (Carmichael 1988:485).

Summary

The recent archaeological excavation carried out at Amato resulted in the finding of previously unknown type of artifacts, most notably the bird bone necklace. The identification of the bird species is required to assess the symbolic importance of that particular type of bird. Because many ancient ritual behaviors continued to be practiced during Inka times, it may be possible to find ethnohistorical references that may be critical to understanding the symbolic significance of specific bird taxa and their ritual association with death.

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Resumen

En este trabajo se discute el reciente hallazgo de un collar hecho de cientos de huesos (radio-cúbito) de ave encontrado durante las recientes excavaciones efectuadas en el sitio del periodo Intermedio Temprano de Amato, del valle de Acarí. El collar fue hallado asociado a un individuo de sexo masculino, de una edad aproximada de 60 años, que fue excavado en la parte central del sitio arqueológico. El individuo adulto estaba en una postura sentada, con las rodillas flexionadas hacia el pecho y sus brazos a los costados de las extremidades inferiores. El cuerpo había sido envuelto en tejido llano, luego atado con una soguilla, y mantenía una orientación hacia el norte. Inmediatamente al lado derecho del individuo había una deposición de los frutos de maní, mientras que cerca de los pies había un mate cubierto con un fragmento de cerámica. Al lado derecho del individuo había un total de cinco camélidos jóvenes sacrificados y junto a estos se hallaron varias piezas de *Spondylus* trabajados. Finalmente, al frente del individuo adulto estaba el cuerpo de un individuo masculino de aproximadamente 40 años de edad, colocado en posición estirada, pero tirado sobre su estómago. Lo resaltante de este esqueleto, y muchos otros encontrados en sus inmediaciones, es la ausencia del cráneo. Una observación posterior revela que los huesos cervicales presentan claras huellas de corte, sugiriendo que este, y los demás, fueron decapitados.