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## Andean luxury foods: Special food for the ancestors, deities and the elite

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### Abstract

Certain kinds of food can be classed as "luxurious" because they are difficult to procure and reserved for an elite - but luxury foods can be more surely defined from their context of use. Using examples from Andean archaeology the author shows how different foodstuffs perform ceremonial roles in different sectors of society. Many ordinary people use them to feed the ancestors, while the elite may put significance on a variety of consumables, including human blood. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Keywords: Andes, luxury food, ancestors, cultural context, political control

### Full text

#### Headnote

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#### Introduction

Luxury, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Luxury foods are traditionally identified in archaeology as edibles that are exotic, rare, expensive to procure or restricted from the bulk of the population. But it can be argued that this definition is elite-centred, and that luxury foods also existed for non-elites. Luxury foods could be defined as including those presented at ceremonies and feasts at any level. Even the regularly procured foodstuffs of the smallest communities can make a luxurious feast given the right setting, timing, preparation and accessories. There are feasts that are defined by the occasion or the quantity and/or quality of the foodstuffs, not just by the ingredients. Archaeologists can use context to define luxury and thus have a broader definition of luxury food.

Douglas (1988), Farb & Arnelagous (1980), Goody (1982) and Levi-Strauss (1966) among others have demonstrated that food is good to think with, as well as to eat, and this is particularly true for special or luxury foods. These foods are not only linked to economic value but also to their associated ideological importance (Appadurai 1981; Miller 1985). How can archaeologists identify luxury foods in past societies? And in turn, how can foods inform us about luxury and hierarchy in the past?

There are some tastes that run deep in our species, like the desire for fat, sweetness, or spiciness (Farrington & Urry 1985; Richards 1939). We can look for these characteristics in the archaeological record and suggest that these foodstuffs, when they occur, were probably highly valued. But other foods will have to be defined as luxuries based on their cultural and economic settings, their spatial placement, associations and frequencies. Different groups of people have sought for new twists to make their food experiences and presentations interesting. Even the most common of a community's regularly procured foodstuffs can be part of a luxurious, opulent feast, given the right setting, timing, amounts, and accessories and opinions. The most usual form of feasting is either a lot of regular food for a long time or exotic or expensive items served in rare combinations (Dietler & Hayden 2001). It could be argued that all forms of feasting are socially or culturally special.

Discussions of luxury food should therefore include feasting defined at every social level. South America has the greatest plant diversity and number of ecological zones of any continent, and a complex food history. This paper presents evidence for past luxury foods in two cultural situations: foods for ancestral worship and foods used to create elites and power. The examples come from the Peruvian coast and the central highlands. I will illustrate each cultural situation first by using a traditional definition of luxury food - for example, food that is rare and/or exotic. I will then use a less traditional definition and consider food that is abundant and presented in a special feasting context. But first I want to introduce some aspects of the archaeology of the indigenous Andes to help put their luxury foods into context and to illustrate some of the rich complexity that past Andean societies reveal.

#### The cultural setting

The Andean region, spanning the western coast, the mountain spine, and the western part of the Amazon basin of South America, is extremely complex ecologically and socially. This area includes the modern countries of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, northern Chile, and North-west Argentina. Over its 10 000 years of cultural history, there has been a diverse range and scale of societies from long-lived small fishing, gathering/hunting and farming communities to large cities with strong, stratified elites that ruled over vast territories for hundreds of years. Once people began populating the coasts, valleys and highland puna, they became sedentary, clustering around food resources. Different luxury foods were present in each time period.

Today, as in the past, ancestors are an important component of Andean social and political self-definition; ancestors have jurisdiction over all resources (Abercrombie 1998; Arnold 1992; Bastien 1978; Doyle 1988; Salomon 1987). Ancestors reside in the earth and thus all social events are marked with libations to the earth (and the ancestors) through the pouring of liquid onto or into the ground. Feeding the ancestors in this way is an essential part of ritual. Food illuminates any political setting, as its production is directly tied to the blessings of the ancestors and thus to the justification of social existence and political difference. A major component of ancestral recognition, group identity, and elite formation in the Andes therefore is food presentation. In this way, special food events are a key to the creation and maintenance of the Andean political world. Elites with real, as well as symbolic power existed in the larger Andean polities like the Chimú, Huari, Tiwanaku, and the Inca. We see this materially in large and elaborate architecture (Donnan 1985; Moore 1996; Moseley & Day 1982), burials (Alva & Donnan 1993; Isbell 1997), artefacts such as ceramics (Cook 1994; Bray pers. comm.; D'Altroy 1991; D'Altroy, Lorandi & Williams 1998), and textiles (Rowe 1984).

#### Andean feasts and their associated luxury foods

In the quotidian Andean diet, plant foods are usually boiled into soups or stews in large pots and consumed communally or in bowls or plates. If potatoes are the staple, they are boiled and laid out on a cloth to be peeled and eaten with a little spicy relish (Johnsson 1986). If the staple foodstuff is bitter manioc, it is grated and squeezed before baking and is consumed with condiments. If seafoods dominate the diet, they are grilled or boiled in a thick soup. For special meals, vast amounts of these foods may be consumed and the ingredients are augmented with fermented beverages and meats; special recipes for condiments are used. Fermented drink transforms the participants so that they can feed the ancestors through their own consumption. One must fill up with drink so that the extra can be transferred to the ancestors. Ethnohistorical records note that fermented beverages were highly esteemed and critical for ceremonial gatherings. Many plants could be used to create the fermented beverage chicha, including manioc, Chenopodium, and even fruit from the Schinus tree. Drink was highly prized when made from maize, at least since before the Inca times in the highlands (Murra 1960:397; Rowe 1946:292; Salomon 1986; Hastorf & Johannessen 1993). To make the drink extremely special, the Inca would use different varieties of maize, which could be imported long distances.

Meat, not consumed on a regular basis, is important in feasts. Like beer, it identifies an event as important, making it luxurious. We know from modern ritual presentations, *mesas*, that animal fat is an especially important gift to the ancestors (Fernandez Juarez 1995; Kuznar 2001:52). A poignant luxury food for the ancestors is described for the Wari of western Brazil by Beth Conklin (1993, 1995). In this part of the Amazon, burial practices have been linked to future food access, as the living ask the recently dead to speak to their departed relatives, asking them to send animals to hunt. People believe the dead become the whitelipped peccary, their main meat source. In this way the Wari ancestors are directly providing food for the living with their own bodies. This is why the Wari carefully mourn and tend the recent dead, ultimately roasting the dead and consuming their flesh, initiating the cycle of provisioning the living by the dead. Conklin explains how the most sacred and ceremonial food, the rarest of all meats, is the recent dead themselves, eaten to quicken the dead to their next place and to bring the peccary back to the living in the future. Linking the dead with the living through food offerings and the perpetuation of life is often considered necessary for the reproduction of society, although highly charged and dangerous (Sanday 1986).

In the historic past, meat in special meals was prepared as dried (*charqui*), grilled, roasted in an earth oven, or in stews, mixed in with other foodstuffs, like potatoes and chile peppers (Cobo 1964 [1653]: 244). The Inca imperial feasts revolved around the meat of deer, duck, guinea pig, birds, fish, camelids, or more exotic animals from the jungle, crocodiles and monkeys (Guaman Poma 1980:360; Murra 1960; Murua 1962 [1590]).

#### Past luxury food for the Ancestors

The identification of luxury food requires us to search for special contexts of consumption as well as exotic and rare items. Based on historic and recent practice, such contexts could be defined as feasts that honour the ancestors as well as those that mark leadership (see below). In the Andes, ancestors are the elder elite. They have jurisdiction over all resources, being the keepers of the herds as well as owners of all cropland. Presenting food offerings to and feasting with the ancestors therefore unites a community at specific moments as well as honouring this elite. In these settings, special foods are prepared for and presented to the ancestors. These meals demonstrate two dimensions of luxury food consumption, rarity in the first instance and large quantities of food in the second.

Luxury food for the dead is illustrated in the Ayacucho valley at the Middle Horizon capital of Huari (Figure 1; Isbell & McEwan 1991). Between AD 600-900, a large urban centre was built with a ritual core. In that core, there was a series of civic districts, for political gatherings, group ceremonies and special burial grounds. It is in one burial chamber area, *Cheqo Wasi* that we find finely cut double stone tombs. These are rectangular sunken rooms of stone slabs that enclose a second stone box. Figure 2 illustrates one of these inner stone boxes, seen with the outer curved encasement surrounding it. This outer enclosure mimics a small room that would allow for several people to enter and meet with the dead. Notable in the elaborate, fine stonework are small holes that are cut in the top of the tomb's rock slabs (*ttoco*; Isbell pers. comm.). They sit in the "doorway" of the burial chamber. These holes open into the tombs and were for talking to and feeding the ancestors. A Huari "food" offered in these tombs was *mullu*, or ground up *Spondylus* shell. It is procured on the Ecuadorian coast, and thus exotic and rare. *Mullu* is still considered food for the gods, and this is borne out for the past by its regular occurrence in ceremonial architectural buildings in the highlands. Feeding the ancestors with rare and special food was a dimension of luxury food in the Andes.

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Figure 1. Map of Andean region with areas mentioned in text located.

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Some of the most remarkable "documents" in Andean archaeology are the finely executed Moche ceramic vessels (Donnan 1976). The Moche culture existed in northern Peru along the warm, rich but dry coastal valleys, dating between 200 BC and AD 500 (Figure 1). Both the three-dimensional and the fine lined drawings on the vessels provide incredible detail of past lives and beliefs. If we agree with Catherine Bell (1992) that portrayals of rituals are most probably events from actual rituals, we can learn a lot from these drawings about past rituals and world-views. Many of the depictions contain information about the place of food in Moche ceremonial life. Not all foodstuffs are portrayed on these ceramics, however. Bourget and Donnan think that the scenes depicted on the pots are ceremonial (and therefore real) and not mythical (Bourget, pers. comm.; Donnan 1976:63). Given that these well-crafted pots were made for and used by the elite classes, we can assume that the foods displayed were important in their symbolic and political world. The important foodstuffs portrayed and painted on these ceramic vessels are beans, potatoes, maize and peanuts. Each crop has a symbolic meaning within the Moche cosmology. Most depicted rituals involve the presentation and consumption of food (Donnan 1976:134). In many ritual scenes, food is being prepared and served on vessels including stirrup spout ceramic canteens, metal goblets and gourd plates (Figures 3, 4 and 5). Figure 3 presents food offerings for the dead. In his fine line drawing illustrates how food was presented on stacked plates lowered into a burial. Arscnaulr (1991) discusses burial food depictions, noting that these stacked gourds contained meat on one plate and vegetables on another, illustrating the honorific and luxurious meals presented in individual portions for the most esteemed.

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Figure 2. A Middle Horizon burial chamber at Cheqo Wasi, Huari, Peru. Note the small libation hole cut into the top of the tomb covering (Photo courtesy of William Isbell).

Gumerman (1994) identified botanical evidence from Moche phase burials in the burials at Pacatnamu. He finds that the most important component was maize. These special foods become more luxurious when he identifies the maize varieties found in the burials to be different (and uncommon) from the maize varieties in the site's domestic middens. This supports the less direct evidence of the burial paintings that the dead received special, and in this case rarer foodstuffs.

There is a great deal of literature and archaeological evidence suggesting the great care taken over the ancestors, including periodic presentations of special foods. This is seen not just, by the many vessels found in graves but also by the foodstuffs and even in the care of the bodies. Ceremonies that accompany these burials included feasting. Early examples of food offerings in the highlands illustrate that such beliefs occurred then as well. At the Formative fishing, farming and herding site of Chiripa, Bolivia, located on the shores of Lake Titicaca, recent excavations have shown that the first dwellers at the site, beginning around 1500 BC, wrapped adult females and then buried them with food utensils in pits (Hastorf 1999).

Figure 2. A Middle Horizon burial chamber at Cheqo Wasi, Huari, Peru. Note the small libation holes cut into the tap of the tomb coverings (Photo Courtesy of William Isbell).

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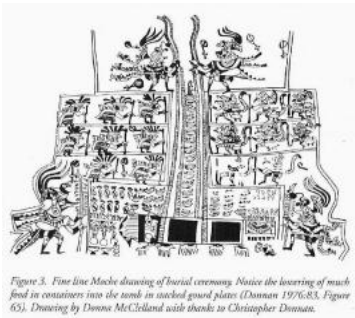


Figure 3. Fine line Moche drawing of burial ceremony. Notice the lowering of much food in containers into the tomb in stacked gourd plates (Donnan 1976:83, Figure 65). Drawing by Donna McClelland with thanks to Christopher Donnan.

ritualised food presentation and consumption. There is a very famous Moche scene that is portrayed in both a ceramic line drawing as well as in a painted mural at Panamarca, a southern Moche administrative centre (Figure 4). This scene is called the Presentation Scene by Donnan (1975,1976), because the major figures (letters A, B, C and D) are involved in presenting and receiving drink in a goblet. In this figure we see how the Moche placed food at the core of their important rituals and therefore at the centre of power (Quilter 1990). This scene became especially remarkable when some of the figures and their decoration were excavated in tombs at several sites in the Moche area. To date both figure C and figure A have been unearthed, at the famous sites of Sipan and El Morro, with Alva first identifying these personages at his Sipan excavations (Alva & Donnan 1993). Such excavations inform us that these ritual scenes were probably enacted by living leaders who were considered deities - the drawings were not just images of mythical deities. We now believe that these foods were presented to these leaders at specific ceremonies. What is actually being given to the leader A, by B in this figure, is a goblet. The rest of the figure has been interpreted as a time sequence, with C handing the covered goblet finally to B who in turn gives it to A. If one follows the story of this mural, one sees that this "meal" is associated with a series of events linked to prisoners, depicted as naked with ropes around their necks. Blood is spilling from their necks that are being cut by tumi knives. There are drops of blood depicted in and around the prisoners, suggesting that they are being cut to shed blood (Bourget 2000). The mural suggests that it is the prisoners' blood that is presented and consumed by the main rayed figure A. Bourget and Newman (1998) have run chemical analyses on the contents of one such ceramic goblet found in an elite Moche tomb. The result was human blood. So, the picture may in fact reflect reality. Prisoners were captured. Leaders were dressed up as deities A, B, C and D, and presented with a special feast of human blood. What greater show of power over life than the consumption of captives' blood. This is a rare luxury that is imbued with power over life and death.

In Figure 5 we learn more about Moche luxury food. Here we see similar double-stacked gourd meals that went into the previously discussed tomb, placed neatly across a room of an important personage. These "meals" even have feet on them as if they hold a special life force, making them more than normal food. The foods on these gourd plates are often meat, legumes and potatoes (Figure 5b; Arsenault 1991). The prepared and wrapped plates in Figure 5a are waiting to be given to the personage sitting on the top of the mound, as he is presented with the first of many meals. This large quantity of food seems to be appropriate for this important person. Thus the important person is feasting in a ceremony of consumption, with two onlookers. There was much more food than one person could eat, but perhaps this amount was for the deities that he would have been representing as well. This sacred food in such quantities represents another type of luxury that few could have partaken in. Another example of opulence in the Moche culture comes from actual remains. At the site of El Brujo, running along side a temple mound, George Gumerman has found large roasting troughs filled with camelid bones, suggesting that food was prepared in very large quantities for worshipers at the mound (Gumerman pers. comm.). This too provides a view of large scale food preparation that is associated with religious rituals in the Moche world. Again, freshly cooked meat is the luxury provided by the temple.

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Figure 4. A fine line drawing of the Moche Presentation Scene with the numbering of the major characters and activities involved (Donnan 1976:118, Figure 104a). Drawing by Donna McClelland with thanks to Christopher Donnan.

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Figure 5a. Fine line Moche drawing of ceremony involving the presentation of food. Note the double stacked gourds filled with food and tied up, (Donnan 1976: 67, Figure 48): Drawing by Patrick Finnerty.

Early Chiripa deposits, dating from 1500 to 1000 BC, reflect the first intensive regular use of this site. This phase culminated in a series of well-constructed surfaces. Here, layers of extensive white and yellow plaster surfaces were laid down, within a walled mudbrick enclosure. Five of the six articulated early burials thus far uncovered by the Taraco Archaeological Project were flexed, wrapped in reed mats and placed within unlined pits in this plastered area (Dean & Kojan 1999). Most importantly, two of the pits contained multiple burials, each with one intact body and several secondary, partial burials above or next to it. This suggests that the burial pits were reopened over time to add individuals and offerings. Both of these multiple burials focus on an adult female with sodolite beads, worn grinding stones, and whole vessels. Subsequent interments of two children and one adult are found in the one stone lined pit, with two additional females in another. Three of the single burials are juveniles. A recent excavation uncovered the largest of these interments in a double pit burial. It is a burial of a 12 year old, virtually an adult in that culture. This person had an accompanying white plaster lined chamber containing two lovely cooking vessels, one family sized, the other a much larger pot suitable for cooking for many people at once. In this example, the feasting dishes were buried with the dead.

The data we have thus far during this 500 year time period suggest that the early residents of Chiripa began to hold periodic rituals surrounding the dead, especially the adult women. Pits were reopened to add other family members and to offer food to the dead. Rituals are substantiated by the Early Chiripa ceramic data, that show changes in vessel type (Steadman 1999). Below the plastered surfaces there is a mixed assemblage of undecorated cooking and serving domestic wares. Associated with the surfaces and these burials however, the ceramics are predominantly serving vessels, with more bowls and small jars, such as would be used in food-oriented rituals or feasting. The organic evidence thus far identified suggests the full range of foods present, such as eggs, birds, camelids, potatoes, and quinoa (Moore et al, 1999; Whitehead 1999). In this case at Chiripa, luxury foods are the full spectrum of meat and plants but in larger quantities.

#### Luxury food for the elite

The second context of Andean luxury food illustrates how states create their godlike leaders through ritualised food presentation and consumption. There is a very famous Moche scene that is portrayed in both a ceramic line drawing as well as in a painted mural at Panamarca, a southern Moche administrative centre (Figure 4). This scene is called the Presentation Scene by Donnan (1975,1976), because the major figures (letters A, B, C and D) are involved in presenting and receiving drink in a goblet. In this figure we see how the Moche placed food at the core of their important rituals and therefore at the centre of power (Quilter 1990). This scene became especially remarkable when some of the figures and their decoration were excavated in tombs at several sites in the Moche area. To date both figure C and figure A have been unearthed, at the famous sites of Sipan and El Morro, with Alva first identifying these personages at his Sipan excavations (Alva & Donnan 1993). Such excavations inform us that these ritual scenes were probably enacted by living leaders who were considered deities - the drawings were not just images of mythical deities. We now believe that these foods were presented to these leaders at specific ceremonies. What is actually being given to the leader A, by B in this figure, is a goblet. The rest of the figure has been interpreted as a time sequence, with C handing the covered goblet finally to B who in turn gives it to A. If one follows the story of this mural, one sees that this "meal" is associated with a series of events linked to prisoners, depicted as naked with ropes around their necks. Blood is spilling from their necks that are being cut by tumi knives. There are drops of blood depicted in and around the prisoners, suggesting that they are being cut to shed blood (Bourget 2000). The mural suggests that it is the prisoners' blood that is presented and consumed by the main rayed figure A. Bourget and Newman (1998) have run chemical analyses on the contents of one such ceramic goblet found in an elite Moche tomb. The result was human blood. So, the picture may in fact reflect reality. Prisoners were captured. Leaders were dressed up as deities A, B, C and D, and presented with a special feast of human blood. What greater show of power over life than the consumption of captives' blood. This is a rare luxury that is imbued with power over life and death.

#### Conclusions

The archaeological identification of specific foods as luxury foods will always be a challenge. By defining the context in which food was used, as well as how difficult it was to procure we can begin to discern a larger array of special meals and luxurious presentations and consumptions of food in Andean ceremonies and politics. In the Andes, luxurious food is intimately linked to the ancestors and to elites. In this paper I have presented several cultural situations where we can begin to uncover luxurious foods such as shell, meat, blood as well as meaningful crops. I hope that the approach I have presented here can open up our understanding of past political activities through the analysis of food presentation and consumption, and allow us to interpret more of the past through foodways.

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Figure 5b. An example of such a packet of food.  
Donnan remarks that this is an example of ceremonial food (Donnan 1976: 134, Figure 120).

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