Recuay Interaction through Material Exchange, Conflict, Burial, and Cultural Contexts

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**Abstract**

This literature review focuses on archaeological research on the Recuay Culture’s interactions with local groups. The Recuay (AD 100-700) were an agricultural and pastoral culture, building villages and small cities with monumental necropolises in the Central Highlands of the Andes. The review emphasizes peer-reviewed English publications on changes to the construction of the Recuay as an Archaeological Culture throughout the various schools of thought in the twentieth century. Early work emphasized great pan-Andean sequences focused on the monumental Chavin, Wari-Tiahuanaco, and Inca. The Processual era saw a rise in the Recuay as dynamic actors in a regional trade network. They had territorial relations with the neighboring Moche. More recent research has highlighted the relationships as our datasets have expanded. Contemporary methodology allows far more grounded models of interaction. Our understanding of the Recuay has been inexorably linked with our understanding of the Moche and the Wari in particular. One of the goals is to provide an overview of how the research has defined the Recuay from the period of Uhle to the present and to outline the directions of contemporary and future research. The other goal is to discuss the changes in our understandings of the Andean trade networks in the Recuay era, focusing on contemporary and succeeding groups.

Key Words: Recuay, Moche, Wari, Andean Trade, Pre-Colombian Trade, Archaeological culture

“And they make their *rescates*, exchanging a plate of fruit for a pot of stew; buy some salt with agi pepper, buy some meat with maize, and so on. In this way, they all get what they need in exchange for their surplus goods… It is done in the following way: the Indian women put all their goods, or part of them if they are fruits or things of this nature, in small piles arranged in a row… The Indian woman who comes to buy with her maize instead of money sits very slowly next to the one selling and makes a small pile of maize with which she plans to pay for what she is buying…The one who is selling looks at the maize, and if she thinks it is too little, she does not say a word… which from beginning to end are never spoken, even if the transaction lasts half an hour, but rather by deeds. The seller reaches with her hand and brings the maize toward her.”

On the subject of economic exchange in the Andes (Cobo 1979 [1653]:34-35)

**Introduction**

Recent research fashions the Recuay as producers of materials if not final products. Kaolin vessels and raw clay were prized in the interfaces of Moche and Recuay cultures. Camelid wool from Recuay and highland pastures made their way to the coasts. In time, Obsidian traveled through the Recuay highlands into the Moche coastal valleys, the longest distance trading network the Recuay were enmeshed with. Later, the trade would come to focus on the rising Wari locus. What followed was some conquests, but more cultural exchange. The Wari Chullpa burial and Wari artistic motif predated any direct confrontation between the cultures. Today the Recuay are a fully-formed Archaeological culture, with a lot of grey areas left to fill.

**Recuay Material Culture Exchange**

Early in the archaeological investigations of the Recuay, the Recuay were treated as one of many unique regional ceramic styles. Though early researchers understood the Recuay were in the same geographic region as the Chavín sequence, but they also found they were unable to identify the relationship in the sequence. The distinct Recuay style of pottery was post-Chavín, but how long, or how closely related was unknown (Bennett 1943:324). Early in the archaeological investigation into the Recuay, the discussion was dominated by ceramic style, and not yet as an archaeological culture.

From the collapse of Chavín to around AD 500 the highlands could be split into a wealth of regional styles, sometimes referred to as a mosaic of styles (Lau 2013: 33). During this time the Recuay were largely insular, a commonwealth of polities (Lau 2011: 16). There is limited evidence for communication or trade outside the highlands and the political and social structures remain unclear (Lau 2012:28). The best evidence for exchange outside the Recuay highlands in this era comes from the Gallinazo. Gallinazo black on redware are found occasionally in the highlands, and Recuay ceramic bottle forms are occasionally found in the Viru Valley (Lau 2011: 246).

**Ceramic Exchange**

The Recuay had a strong ceramic tradition of Kaolin finewares and distinct highlands motif. These include representations of Recuay buildings and architecture, warriors on the parapets, and drummers in the cities. Warriors tend to be displayed bearing shields and clubs. Occasionally these figures will be displayed in rich adornments bearing staffs and trophy heads (Cromphout 2017:38). Musicians bear drums, pipes, and flutes. Both male and females are shown as musicians. When the musician is shown adjacent warriors, he is always a male and wears a helm akin the other warriors (Cromphout 2017: 47-48). Ceramic motif from the Recuay culture show a trend of stratification with respect to wealth of ornamentation and ritualized combat though less understood than the Moche ritual combat (Cromphout 2017: 32-33).

Another aspect of art within the Recuay ceramic motif is the so called moon animal. The context for this strange creature was not well known. Moon animals are usually a feline motif which has been found on many fineware vessels and with many other motifs around it. One common one is the guardian moon animal. One version of the motif has a human male figures accompanying or flanked by the moon animal. Another shows a human figure accompanying llamas with a moon animal adjacent. (Hohmann 2003). The moon animal is likely part of ritual structures as it is shown highly stylized in some cases such as a rounded head with four moon animal emanations found on a sherd at Pashash (Figure XXX).

A black and white logo

Description automatically generated with low confidence

**figure XXX** Head with emanations, sherd 12/7 from Grieder 1978:139

After AD 500 there is an incredible increase in trade both with the coast and with other highlands groups. Two main trade routes seem to be along the Callejón itself and through the Cordillera Negra (Lau 2012: 28). From the period between AD 500-600, the primary exchange was costal, with Moche Blackwares being highly valued among the Recuay (Lau 2012: 27). Though the Moche were known for combat imagery and seem to have fought with their neighbors, they also are known to trade with their neighbors. In the Chao Valley, north of the Callejón, the Santa Rita B site produced strong evidence of Moche and Recuay ceramic trade. Around AD 500 the Moche controlled the valley, having claimed or pacified the Gallinazo (Schwartz 2010: 13). The Santa Rita B site was framed as a trade post, evidenced by a wealth of Moche, Recuay, and other ceramics present. It is also located on the floodplain and may be the only place a city could possibly be built in the immediate area (Schwartz 2010: 8).

Out of 190 sherds sampled from Santa Rita B, around 3% were Recuay styled (Schwartz 2010: 13). When these were analyzed by X-Ray Fluorescence for chemical signature, the pieces of Kaolin ceramic were mostly made in a local Kaolin deposit. Critically six ceramics were made of this local Kaolin using Recuay form and motif (Schwartz 2010: 50). The implication of these findings supports the hypothesis of a rich trade network. Whoever made these Recuay ceramics in local clay would likely have been either a member of the Recuay culture or have traveled enough in the highlands to acquire the style and skill. Either case solidifies the understanding of an enmeshed Recuay and Moche trade network north and west of the Callejón (Schwartz 2010: 58). This finding introduces the chance of members of the Recuay culture making Recuay ceramics in foreign lands. Now the Recuay can’t be seen as members of a culture at one end of the network, but as actors in many facets at many locations.

The Moche inhabited the floor of the Nepeña Valley starting around AD 300 (Chicoine 2011: 535). There were 42 sites in the Nepeña Valley with Recuay ceramics. Most were hilltop settlements with architectural traits similar those found in the Callejón de Huaylas. These two traits introduced a clear cultural continuity with other sites in the highlands (Proulx 1982: 87-88). Significantly the Huancarpón site, the most monumental in the entire Nepeña Valley, contained the fired kaolin ceramics, galleries, and lithics associated with the highland Recuay (Proulx 1982: 86-87). Ceramic vessels and especially Kaolin materials were exchanged or traded through the Nepeña Valley and many of these sites show a mixing of Recuay and Moche materials (Proulx 1982:88).

At the Huambacho site, only eight kilometers from the Pacific coast in the Nepeña Valley, there is an unusual burial identified. The majority of valley floor burials are clearly Moche, either through grave goods or through sacrifice of captives (Chicoine 2011: 528). This single burial is unique for having no ceramic vessels, but simple cotton clothing and a leather bag with coca leaf. There was also a feline headdress and a pointed mace weapon (Chicoine 2011: 537). These features together have been identified as a highland individual, likely Recuay. The individuals were in excellent condition and accompanied by diverse grave goods. Grave 10 and 11 at the site contained the individuals associated with the highlands. Though both were associated with foreign Recuay materials and burial customs, there was scarce evidence of perimortem trauma or pathology to indicate violent deaths (Chicoine 2011: 535,539-541). This individual is evidence for the contact between Recuay and Moche peoples which is not overtly related to any combat. A likely explanation is this is a foreign merchant or traveler who died abroad and was buried at Huambacho (Chicoine 2011: 543). Together, these show the Moche and Recuay as actors in trade, and sheds some light on the complexity of the relationship. There is ritual combat and sacrifice, but also co-habitation and mutually beneficial relationships.

There is evidence for interaction in an even wider network. The Moche and Lambayque each represented highlanders in ceramics. These are generally identified by their non-coastal dress, including ornaments such as musical drums and labrets (Cordy-Collins 1002: 247). Though these representations are difficult to identify to a source, they are unmistakably highlanders. The figures carry drums foreign to the Moche coast and sacks with coca. These features indicate a northern Ecuador culture, likely La Tolita or Jama-Coaque both of whom are shown persistently in Moche arts wearing labrets (Cordy-Collins 2001: 254). Though these labret wearing foreigners likely do not represent the Recuay, they are evidence of the network the Recuay were a part of, albeit through the Moche. The people were interacting with cultures across the Andes, but not part of a pan-Andean sequence, merely as a function of exchange and representation.

**Moche Recuay iconography** There were a distinct similarity of style and motif between the Recuay and Moche. There are a few hybrid vessels known where different cultures had very similar styles (Reichert 1982: 281). One of the most important motifs which appeared in many cultures were the crested animals. These appeared in Recuay, Moche, and Gallinazo cultures and generally show a jaguar or puma feline. Critically there is a divergence in how the creature is portrayed. The Recuay used primarily two dimensional felines shown on the vessels. They are sometimes in subordinate or even supporting positions to human figures. Sometimes the creatures are anthropomorphized and even wear checkered tunics. When the Moche show the same animal, it tends to be a three dimensional image of the crested animal. Their use was not as a motif, but as the style of the vessel itself. When the Moche used the feline it was a dominant motif on and around the vessel itself (Reichert 1982: 286-288). **I SHOULD GET PICS**

These motifs may not be evidence of cultural contact and the spread of motif in the Early Intermediate Period, but rather a manifestation of the earlier diffusion of the Chavín style during the Early Horizon. The crested animal motif seemed to spread with the Chavín religion far around the Andes. As Chavín fractured into its respective mosaic, the Gallinazo, Moche, and Recuay kept the style of the crested animal and used it into their new cultures. Though the Recuay and Moche were distinct, they were cultures both influenced by the ancestral Chavín styles. This is further reinforced by the idea that there are very few hybrid vessels, indicating diffusion of the technique, but there are many instances of the shared motif, implying a possible common origin (Reichert 1982: 190-191).

Moche elites typically represent their worldviews on their finewares. Following Chavín’s decline the coast and highlands were in contact with one another almost immediately. The representations of the Moche, and their predecessor Gallinazo, represented mostly male figures in their art (Wolosyn 2011: 85-86). Sometimes they were warriors or prisoners, shown with some weapons and associated paraphernalia. These could have been scenes from a literal battle, scenes from a mythical battle, scenes from a ritualized form of combat, or scenes from an execution. Warriors identifiable as foreigners are relatively common, the key is that the Moche could identify their own people and the outsiders (Wolosyn 2011: 93).

**Non Ceramic Exchange**

Supplementing this distribution of ceramic and motif is Obsidian. Obsidian is traded archaeologically as a status good, but also has distinct chemical signatures from the very creation of the stone itself. There are several sources of Obsidian in the highlands, and it became a trade good we can observe around the landscape. The Chavín were unique in their heavy usage of obsidian. As the Recuay became central, obsidian declined until after the Wari were emerging as trading partners (Burger et.al 2006: 103). At Chinchawas, the period of intense trade with the Wari in AD 700-850 also saw the greatest amount of Obsidian. This Obsidian was chemically sourced to the Quispisisa source which is near Huanca Sancos in the Ayacucho province (Lau 2005: 90). This source is nearly 600 km from the Callejón and thus reflects the long distance trade network the Recuay were entangled in (Burger et.al. 2006:101). During this era the Recuay enjoyed cultural stability and prosperity being connected with such a vast network produced (Burger et.al 2006: 104). As the Wari declined, so too did Chinchawas and the trade network they represented (Burger et.al. 2006: 108). The requisite for such widespread Obsidian so far from the source is an economic advantage for the trade or exchange. In the Callejón this requires stability and prosperity such as the height of Chavín, and the Wari expansion. Nonetheless the Recuay would, at different points in their sequence, trade remarkable distances for it.

Wool was another material traded from the highlands to the coast. The Huaca Santa Clara in the Viru Valley and the Chancay Valley each produced well preserved assemblages of textiles (Szpak et. al. 2015: 451). The textiles in the Viru Valley were spun in local ties and textile technique. The textiles in the Chancay Valley were made in a style associated with the highlands (Szpak et. al. 2015: 455-456). Though there were local textile styles, the sources of the camelid wool were not from these areas. The samples have an isotopic signature of the highlands, and not to the wool found in the Viru Valley. The samples from Chancay resembled closely the isotopic signature of textiles from a sample of camelids recovered at the Chinchawas site in particular (Szpak et. al. 2015: 455). Other highland materials traded great distances include coca, mineral ores, and Kaolin (Szpak et. al. 2015: 457).

The final key in Recuay material exchange is their eventual decline and supplantation by the Wari. The motifs were changed slowly, starting even before the Wari expansion through trade. In time many icons of the older trading network were all but replaced by Wari expansion from the south (Giersz & Makowski 2014: 291). After AD 700 the Wari began to dominate the material trade as Wari polychrome ceramics became highly valued. The Wari also traded in *Spondylus,* turquoise, and obsidian (Lau 2012: 29-30). The Chullpa burial monument had expanded with the trade networks and by this era was the primary means of burial in the Recuay highlands (Lau 2012:41).

By AD 800, the Wari had changed every cultural trajectory in the highlands. The Recuay styles had diminished and the sites were firmly transformed by the Wari bundle (Lau 2012: 32-33). Trade surged and Wari ceramics are found throughout the Callejón. Wari style finewares were also emulated using local materials and techniques (Lau 2012: 32). The largest Wari site in the Callejón is Honcopampa. This site was a Recuay village built around AD 400. Though there is abundant evidence of Wari materials, the architecture remained largely unchanged. Only two of the trademark Wari D-Shaped structures are present at Honcopampa (Lau 2012: 36-37). Critically, the Wari motif did not fully supersede the Recuay. Feline motifs and zoomorphs persisted long after the Recuay (Lau 2012: 40). This understanding of a Wari bundle gives an image closer to what is observed throughout the highlands: diffusion and synthesis of Recuay and Wari material culture.

**Coca Trade** One highly valued trade good from the highlands were the Coca leaves. They were used at higher elevations as a mild stimulant and pain reliever, which when chewed on was said to enhance vigour and strength. Ethnographically Coca is used in marriages, rites of passage, and many ceremonies. Coca is also used for divination and healing among modern Quechua speaking peoples (Valdez et.al. 2015: 234). It was traded widely in historical and contemporary times. The crop had to be cultivated in the highlands, but below 2600 MASL as the crop is not frost resistant (Valdez et.al. 2015: 231-232).

Ethnographically Coca is used widely. The Spaniards abhorred the practice as an indigenous means of intoxication. Bernabe Cobo referenced the leaves’ role in sacrifices made to the earth. While priests and nobles poured chicha libation from golden cups, many vegetables were offered including red ochre, maize flour, and other fruits. The sacrifices were made sometimes as whole leaves, and sometimes as chewed pieces. The Coca was scattered on top of the sacrifices and then chicha was poured on top of all. These sacrifices appear to have been agricultural rituals to the earth (Cobo 1990 [1653]: 116). Naturally the plant’s role in the religious custom, offerings, and mortuary rites made it a prime candidate for persecution as an aspect of idolatry and Satan worship. As time wore on though, the Spaniards learned to profit from the leaves, growing large coca plantations and trading it back to local workers, notably in the great mines at Potosi (Valdez et.al. 2015:232).

Throughout the entire cultural sequences of the Andes, Coca played a significant role in the development of cultures and religions. Coca was likely first cultivated in the Preceramic Phase around 5000-3600 BC likely on the eastern slopes of the Andes. As such Chavín and the culture it spread would have had access to Coca. The temple itself is situated on a major trade route through the highlands. Beyond circumstantial there is limited evidence for Coca properly, but this likely is a survival bias at play more than evidence of disuse (Valdez et.al. 2015: 237).

The Moche and Nasca certainly had access to the crop, despite being coastal and well below where it could be cultivated. There is evidence for periodontal disease among the Moche a direct result of intensive Coca chewing. There have been Coca bags found in the late Classical Nasca, after AD500 (Valdez et.al. 2015: 238). The Wari grew their Coca in the Apurimac Valley, and some researchers have suggested the need of additional Coca fields as a factor in the eastward expansion of the Wari state. In time the Ayacucho Valley would also be used by the Wari for intensive Coca agriculture, a trend continued through the Inka period (Valdez et.al. 2015:235-236).

During the Early Intermediate Period we have extensive evidence for trade in Coca from the highlands to the coastal lowlands. The highlands produced the mountainous crop while the coasts were the demand side. There is often some ambiguity about the origin of Coca as a trade good. There are significant portions of the Andes which can grow Coca and the leaves don’t tend to survive well enough for additional analysis (Valdez et.al. 2015: 240&246).

In addition to the archaeological evidence for the Coca, there is significant artistic representations of the material as well. The Moche depicted foreigners often in art, but sometimes there is evidence for Coca. One ceramic depicts pairs of warriors in the classic Moche Ritualised Conflict scene. Foreigners are shown with disk ornaments and trophy hands in ornate headdresses. These figures also carry small bags with a rounded bottom and decorations visible. These bags are carried around their necks, on their backs, or dangling from their mouths (Benson 1984: 368-369). There are some bags which take on the appearance of human heads. It is possible these are a representation of trophy heads. But there is also a tradition of small metal bags decorated with head-like effigy designs (Benson 1984: 371)

In any case these figures are marked as foreigners represented within Moche arts. Headdresses in the forms of trophy hands are common in representations of highlanders. Some of these figures also carry square shields, a style not found along the coast. The bags too are marks of foreigners (Benson 1984:272). It is likely these people are representations of Recuay people in the arts of the Moche. These motifs are seemingly too specific to be a general outsider, a representation of the relative alterity of the Recuay.

What is clear from this representation is that the Recuay foreigners were battling the Moche. The bags they carry in their mouths and around their necks are not dissimilar to bags used in transporting Coca. We know there was a rich trade between the highlands and lowlands in this era. The Moche used Coca, but they could not grow it on their coastal valley homes. While we know there was extensive trading for it, there are a multitude of battle scenes depicting these bags as well, implying conflict was a part of Coca procurement (Benson 1984: 372).

As with all the Moche ritual conflict art there is a question about how literally the scenes are to be taken. It is possible the Recuay and Moche were literally engaged in conflict over the Coca. As these two cultures were in close contact, there could have been struggles over valuable resources such as Coca (Benson 1984: 372). On the other hand Coca was said to be associated with Amaru: the two headed sky serpent. Coca was a gift from the sky and became associated with Amaru. There is a vessel which displays two figures with ear ornaments and clubs being attacked by the image of the Amaru. This points toward a mythical combat with the legendary snake (Benson 1984: 373). In either case the Moche and the Recuay put time into representing and mythically contextualizing the Coca plant.

Another motif depicting foreigners could have been showing traders. As with the bags of Coca to identify highlanders, some imagery of the Recuay depicts men carrying strombus shells as horns. The motif is called a salesman because it shows a man holding products in his hands, like a salesman. This salesman motif also is shown flanked by birds or jungle felines. It is possible the salesman motif is indeed depicting merchants and their wares. Given the context and the presence of supernatural creatures, it is also possible they are involved in some type of ritual or sacrifice (Wolosyn 2011: 87-88). In either case the salesmen motif clearly indicates a foreigner with iconography associated with the highlands, likely a Recuay individual.

Across these examples of artistic representations of alterity it is clear there is an impulse to identify these foreign people as foreigners. A highlander is easily identifiable as “not Moche” but specific cultural affiliation is not always clear. These are two cultures with a common base of Chavín ideology, material culture, and motif. What separates them is the biological and ecological biomes the culture was forged in: Moche on the coastal valleys and Recuay in the highlands and mountaintops. These are different people with different arts and customs, but also different access to materials the other requires. Coca only grows in the highlands, and strombus shells belong to marine snails. When the Wari arrived they would establish themselves in both and greatly expand production, but in the Early Intermediate Period these areas are not unified. They are rivals, trading partners, sometimes enemies, sometimes sacrifices, but always separate peoples in this era.