

A FRESH THRESHOLD TO A BETTER KNOWLEDGE OF THE ORIGIN OF THE ROMANESQUE GREEN MAN

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Abstract

The origin of the cat image that is the Romanesque Green Man in 12th century cathedrals has not been clearly and definitely established so far. It is well known that Mercia MacDermott's theory is that it was derived from the images of the Makara and Kirttimukha of Hindu mythology; nonetheless, this paper offers a fresh standpoint through the appraisal of a new research line that deals with the materialising of cat images in the ancient cultures of Peru. The inclusion of a profusion of illustrations in this work has the intention of helping to fully spot, identify and recognize the details offered by the text.

Ancient Peruvian mythology

Visiting the many Inka and pre-Inka settlements in Peru, as well as its well-provided museums, brings upon us a number of images that reveal the thought, customs and beliefs of those ancient peoples. One of these images is the cat. It first appeared in pre-Inka groups such as the Chavin, Pacaras and Nazca, who used it on pottery, and on funeral mantles that covered corpses that had previously been shrunk and bent in such a way that their knees reached their jaws.

The strong cat presence in Peruvian pre-Colombian art does not limit itself to simple depictions of the animal, but makes up a genuine web of details that help highlight the intrinsic image of the feline, which represents a demon god named Kon, the ancient flying god worshiped by the Paracas and Nazcas as the creator of the world. Their polychromic vases show him flying and holding a club, food and trophy heads.

In the Chavin culture (900-200 B.C.), the image of a cat of fierce appearance was the dominant design, and, as Victor W. von Hagen states in *The Inka Empire*, this motif prevailed in the cosmology of ancient empires for the following one thousand years.¹

¹ Victor W. von Hagen. *El imperio de los incas* (The Inka Empire). Mexico, Editorial Diana, 1975, p. 26.

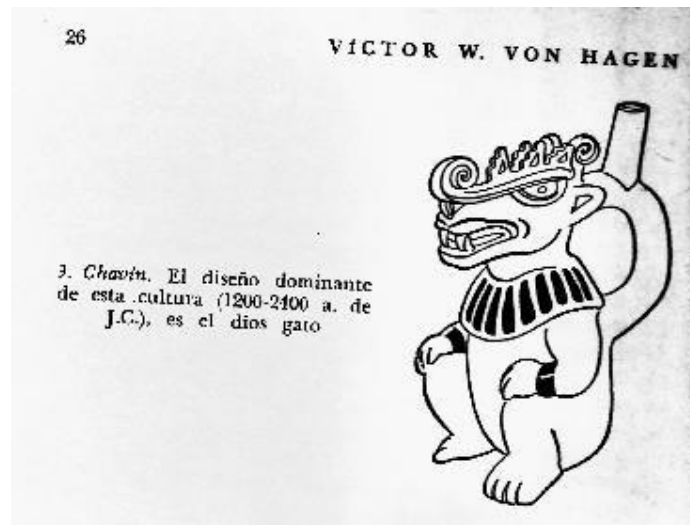


Fig. 1: Illustration of a god-cat of fierce appearance, in von Hagen, *The Inka Empire*.



Fig. 2: Chavin textile.²

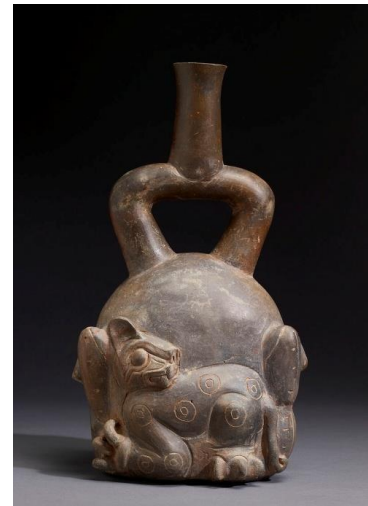


Fig. 3: Chavin feline and cactus stirrup vessel (Walter Art Museum, Baltimore, USA).³

Depictions of anthropomorphic felines, stylised snakes, fish, birds and mythological creatures are found also in Pacaras culture (700 B.C. to 200 A.D.) Its weavers are considered to be the most creative and skilled of all in ancient Peru. Here again, as archaeologist Lizardo Tavera Vega holds, a special motif stands out in the rich Pacaras iconography: it is the combination

² “La cultura chavín”. *Sechinense Histórico. En el camposanto de Yungay, Callejón de Huaylas.* <<http://sechinensehistorico.blogspot.com.ar/p/cultura-chavin.html>>

³ Wikimedia. “Chavín Feline-and-Cactus Stirrup Vessel”. *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chav%C3%ADn_culture#/media/File:Chav%C3%ADn_-_Felineand-Cactus_Stirrup_Vessel_-_Walters_482832.jpg>

of man-like figures with certain bird and feline characteristics represented in a flying attitude.⁴



Figs 4 and 5: Two cat designs embroidered on Paracas funeral mantles.⁵



Fig. 6: Reproduction of the ornamental details of the funeral mantle, Paracas No. 27 (author: Emilio Araujo, 1963). Photo taken by the author at the Inka Museum, Cusco, Peru.

⁴ Lizardo Tavera Vega (archaeologist). "Pacaras: Cerro Colorado y Wari Kayan". *Sitios arqueológicos*, <<http://www.arqueologiadelperu.com.ar/paracas.htm>>

⁵ "Paracas: Cerro Colorado y Wari Kayan". *Sitios Arqueológicos* <<http://www.arqueologiadelperu.com.ar/paracas.htm>>



Fig. 7: Detail, Paracas No. 27 (above).

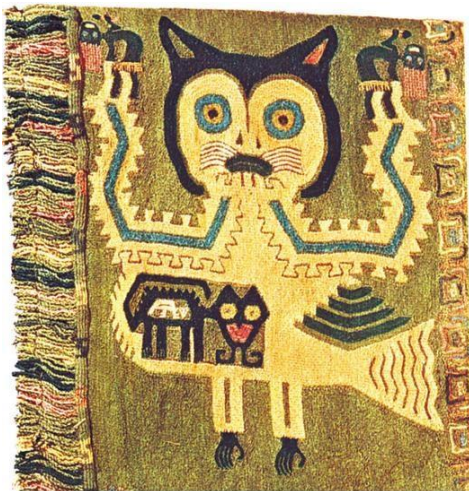


Fig. 8: Paracas textiles: Funeral bundles. The dead were shrouded in several layers of beautiful textiles. (Museum of World Culture in Göteborg: Paracas Collection).⁶

⁶ Lucy Cheung, 'Paracas Textiles', *Crushevil*, <<http://crushevil.co.uk/blog/?p=1424>>



Fig. 9: Paracas vase showing the image of a cat with a long protruding tongue.⁷

Nazca ceramics is of fine manufacture, characterised by its abstract decorations. The regular motif is the god cat, especially one holding decapitated heads. This culture flourished between the 1st century and 9th century AD, probably as a continuation of the Paracas culture, since they shared a similar religion, practices of war, textiles and pottery.



Fig. 10: Demon god-cat painted on a ceremonial vase (Museo de Sullana, Peru).⁸

⁷ “Cultura paracas”. *iperu.org* <<http://www.iperu.org/cultura-paracas>>

⁸ “Museo de la Sullana. Cerámica Nazca”. *Y los dioses vinieron del mar* <<http://ylosdiosesvinierondelmar.blogspot.com.ar/2012/03/museo-de-sullana-ceramica-nazca.html>>



Fig. 11: Demon cat on a Nazca textile panel.⁹

There is a figure, common to Paracas and Nazca art, known as the ‘spotted cat’. It has ‘perky ears, piercing eyes, teeth (sometimes fully bared), whiskers, and claws. The back is covered with spots (sometimes oval and sometimes diamond shaped), and the arms and legs are striped with a very distinctive alternating black-and-white linear pattern reminiscent of a column on a chessboard’.¹⁰ Along with the demon cat, the spotted cat is one of the most respected deities. Sometimes, its image appears together with a star, which is said to symbolise some constellation. It is represented with separated whiskers and a very long protruding tongue. At other times, its image shows a humanoid figure, its head surrounded by snakes arranged in the form of a crown on the forehead, and legs ending in claws.

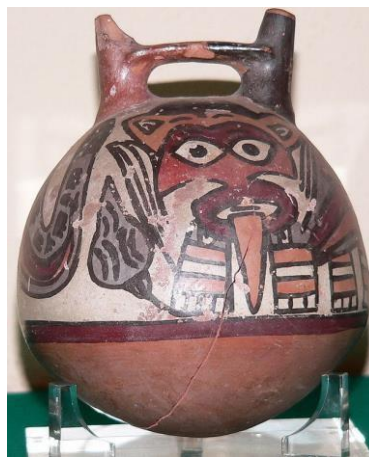


Fig. 12: Spotted cat decorating a vase.¹¹

⁹ ‘Cat demon from a Nazca textile panel, 2-3th century AD’

<<https://es.pinterest.com/pin/569564684093775980>>

¹⁰ Jim R. McClanahan, ‘The Spotted Cat: A Study of Nazca Pottery with Feline Motif’, *Historium*, <<http://historium.com/blogs/ghostexorcist/1641-spotted-cat-study-nazca-pottery-felinemotif.html>>

¹¹ Wikimedia. “Huaco representando el gato moteado” (Depiction of the spotted cat on a vase).

Wikipedia <https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cer%C3%A1mica_nazca#/media/File:Huaco_Nazca.jpg>

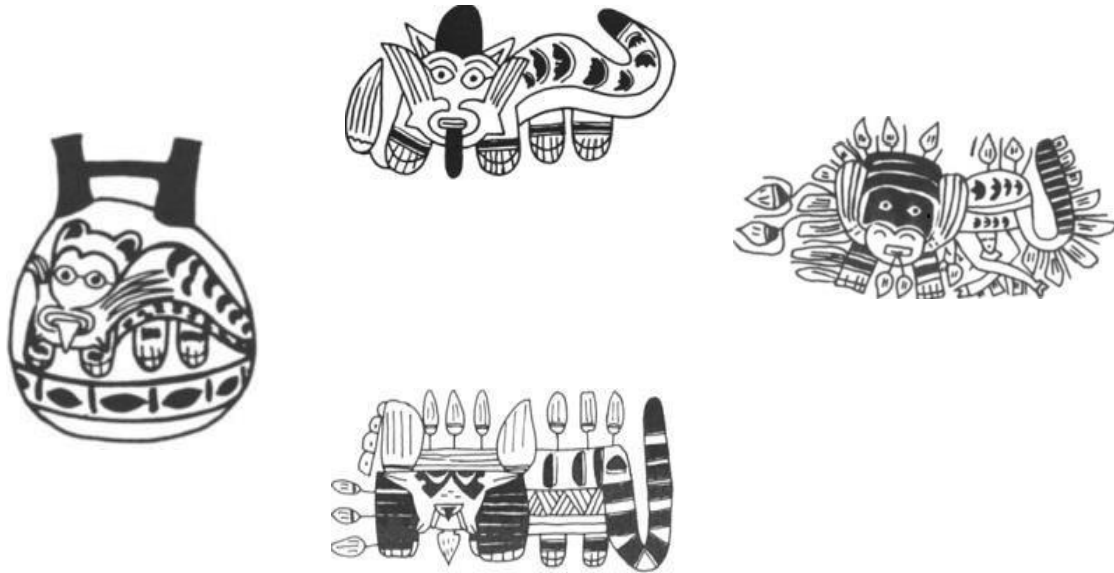


Fig. 13: Examples of the evolution of the spotted cat's appearance during the different phases of Paracas culture.¹²

The Mochica, or Moche, culture – contemporary of the Nazcas – developed from the 2nd to the 7th century AD. Its principal deity was Ai Apaec (this name means ‘that who decapitates’). It was believed to be the Mochicas’ creator and protector, and provider of water, food and military victories. The most common depiction of this god is that of an anthropomorphic feline face with big feline fangs, surrounded by marine waves.



Fig. 14: The god Ai Apaec: image appearing in Huaca of the Moon (archaeological complex on the North coast of Peru).¹³

¹² Jim R McClanahan, ‘The Spotted Cat: A Study of Nazca Pottery with Feline Motif’, *Historium* <<http://historum.com/blogs/ghostexorcist/1641-spotted-cat-study-nazca-pottery-felinemotif.html>>

¹³ ‘La cultura chavin’. *Sechinense Histórico. En el camposanto de Yungay, Callejón de Huaylas.* <<http://sechinensehistorico.blogspot.com.ar/p/cultura-chavin.html>>



Fig. 15: Moche vase in the form of a portrait with a cat on the forehead (Museo de Sullana, Sullana, Peru).¹⁴

The image of the cat appears also in the art pieces of the Wari (or Huari) culture, which developed in the period 500-900 AD. Wari pottery offers rich depictions of animals, mythological beings and mythic creatures with feline heads.



Fig. 16: Wari vessel.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Y los dioses vinieron del mar*

<<http://ylosdiosesvinierondelmar.blogspot.com.ar/search/label/Moche>>

¹⁵ “Cultura Huari”. *Historia* <<http://www.culturamundial.com/2010/05/cultura-huari.html>>

The Makara and the Kirttimukha (Hindu mythology)

Having reached the point where the depiction of cats in early Peruvian cultures is completed, the next step is to refer to Mercia MacDermott's theory, which states that the cat-faced Romanesque Green Man corresponds to the Hindu images of the Makara and the Kirttimukha. To this end, it is important that the following considerations be taken into account:

1. Although the Makara (meaning 'sea monster') takes many different forms throughout Asia, in Hindu culture, it is a sea creature 'depicted as half terrestrial animal in the frontal part (stag, deer, crocodile, or elephant), and half aquatic animal in the hind part (usually a fish or seal tail, though sometimes a peacock or even a floral tail is depicted'.)¹⁶ The image of this mythical creature was extensively used in ancient Sri Lankan royal architecture. In Hindu mythology, the Makara is a marvellous sea creature depicted as half fish and half some other animal. It is represented by the mounted Varuna, Hindu god of wind and sky, and Ganga, the deity associated with the River Ganges.



Fig. 17: Makara image carved in stone.¹⁷

¹⁶ Gilding Art Studio <<http://www.gildingartsstudio.com/creatures.htm>>

¹⁷ 'Makara Mythology'. *Luxury Thailand Travel* <<http://www.luxury-thailandtravel.com/makara.html>>



Fig. 18: Makara carving at Krishna Temple, Hampi, India.¹⁸



Fig. 19: Makara is a mystical creature of Thailand¹⁹

2. ‘Kirttimukha’ is the name of a fierce Hindu demon with horns, huge fangs, and a gaping mouth. It is often a decorative motif in Indian and Southeast Asian temple architecture. It is generally placed above openings such as gates, windows and archways.¹⁹



Fig. 20: The Kirttimukha.²⁰

¹⁸ File: Makara at Krishna Temple.jpg”. *Wikimedia Commons*

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Makara_at_Krishna_Temple.jpg>

¹⁹ “Makara Mythology. All the Legends, Myths and Mysteries”. *Luxury Thailand Travel* <<http://www.luxury-thailand-travel.com/makara.html>>

²⁰ ‘Kirtimukha. Primary Image’, *Himalayan Art*

<<http://www.himalayanart.org/items/81517/images/primary#-272,-1697,2488,0>>



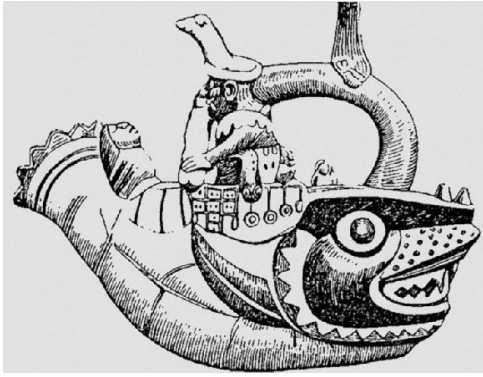
Fig. 21: A Kirttimukha above the gate of a Hindu temple (Kathmandu).²¹

After taking a careful look at the foregoing images (Fig. 17-21), it turns difficult not to admit the obvious: There is not much chance of these Hindu creatures being accepted as cats, or as any other kind of feline. Horns and scaled skin, crocodile-shaped mouth and aquatic nature do not correspond to the appearance of the cats that usually decorate Romanesque churches, so Mercia MacDermott's theory that these creatures are the predecessors of the wide-eyed Romanesque Green Man felines is not immediately plausible.

However, most of the images offered above as illustrations of the different Peruvian cultures clearly show their similarity to cats, not only for having claws, but also for their characteristic tails, lively ears, sharp eyes and whiskers. Undoubtedly, these cats look more like the Romanesque Green Man than do the creatures Mercia MacDermott's theory posits. It seems, then, that the time has come to evaluate this fact, by considering whether the fresh threshold this author has advanced in this paper leads to a better knowledge of the origin of the cat-faced Romanesque Green Man.

As a last point of this research, it is important to draw attention to the fact that it is probable that the world went global before it is generally thought to have. The following images of the Mochica period (Figs 22 & 23), where a deity is seen flying on a sea-dragon, and those of Hindu mythology that show Ganga (Figs 24 & 25) and Veruna (Fig. 26) riding a Makara, allow the assumption that these cultures met at some point of history. Certainly, that will be an exciting topic for a future research study.

²¹ 'Kirttimukha above the gate of a Hindu temple in Kathmandu', *Wikipedia*, <https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirttimukha#/media/File:Kirttimukha.Nepal1.JPG>



Figs 22 and 23: A Mochica deity riding a sea-dragon: Ancient ceramic relics, late Mochica.²²



Figs 24 and 25: The goddess Ganga riding a Makara.



Fig. 26: Varuna (god of the waters) riding a Makara.²³

²² Tarmo Kulmar, 'The deity of sky: one way to interpret the Moche iconography', Figure 4 and photo E <<https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol10/sky.htm>>

²³ Swami B.G. Narasingha, 'Makara — Myth or Fact? Dinosaurs in Srimad Bhagavatam', <<http://gosai.com/writings/makara-myth-or-fact-dinosaurs-in-srimad-bhagavatam>>

Conclusion

Almost every one of the large number of depictions of cats belonging to early Peruvian cultures show their indisputable feline features. They correspond to pieces of fine pottery generally used for ceremonial purposes, and richly and smartly woven textiles used as funeral mantles. All of those representations belong to a deity known as ‘spotted cat’, ‘demon god cat’, ‘flying cat’ and other such names.

For its part, the mythological Hindu images of Makara and Kirttimukha that Mercia MacDermott’s theory proposes as the predecessors of the cat faces in Romanesque/Norman cathedrals actually do not show any resemblance to the same. As a matter of fact, they are creatures whose features are far from those of a real cat or any other kind of feline: horns, scaled skin, crocodile shaped mouth and aquatic nature.

Therefore, it should be accepted that the Peruvian cats look more like the Romanesque Green Man than do the Makara or Kirttimukha of Mercia MacDermott’s theory.

In addition, from the images provided to show the similarities between creatures of Peruvian cultures and those of Hindu mythology, it must be inferred that they seem to have had a certain kind of connection at some point, far back in time. A careful look reveals an important visual link between them.

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