

Life in Ancient Peru

Studying the 4,000-year-old rubbish of a Peruvian coastal people may provide insights into the origins—and future—of human civilization

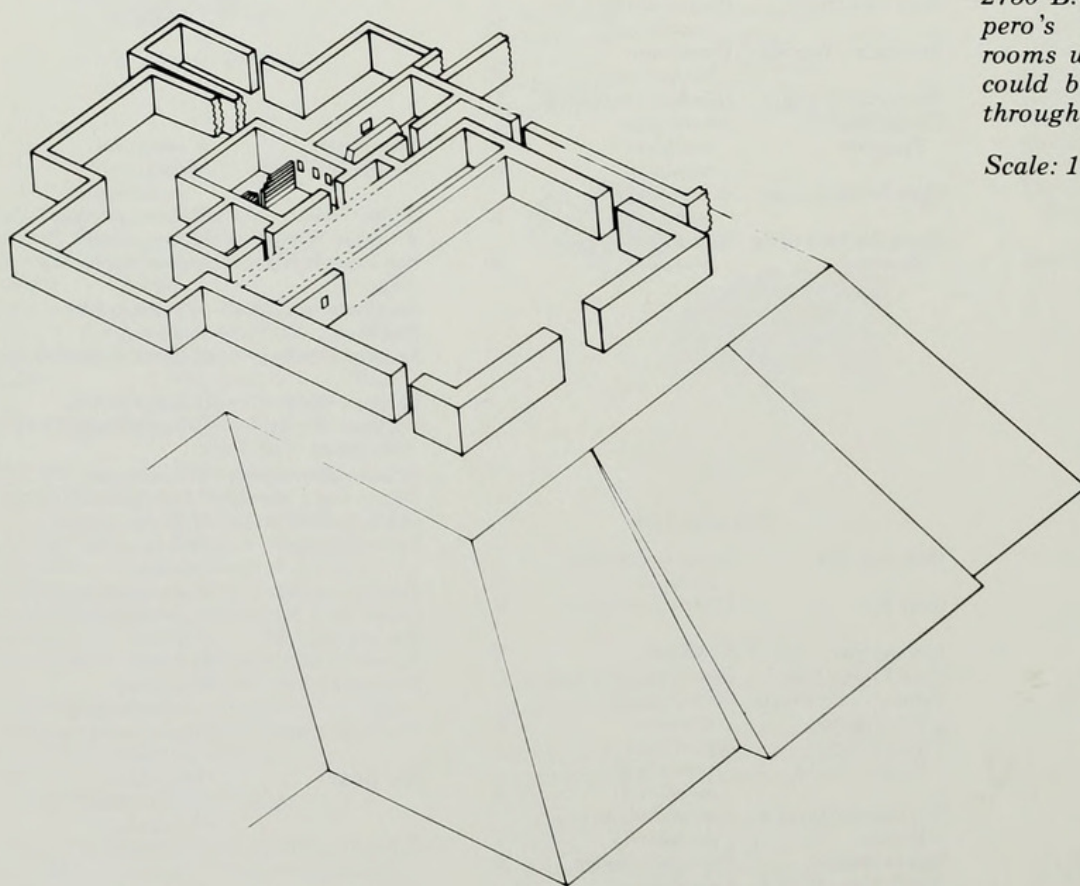
By Robert A. Feldman

Agriculture has been the mainstay of life in South America for more than 3,000 years, and because of its importance archaeologists are actively concerned with the origins and consequences of plant domestication. The Field Museum's recent exhibition "Ancient Ecuador: Culture, Clay and Creativity" (opened April 1975) dealt with the consequences of agriculture in Ecuador. In the catalog for that exhibit, research associate Donald W. Lathrap wrote:

civilization cannot appear until a truly productive agricultural system has been developed. Large groups of city dwellers who are not producing their own food can be fed only after really efficient patterns of agricultural production have been envolved. It is an urban population that provides the context for craft specializations, a large professional priesthood, a professional military, a bureaucracy, and finally writing—the various characteristics by which we define civilization.

While this statement is certainly true for the elaboration

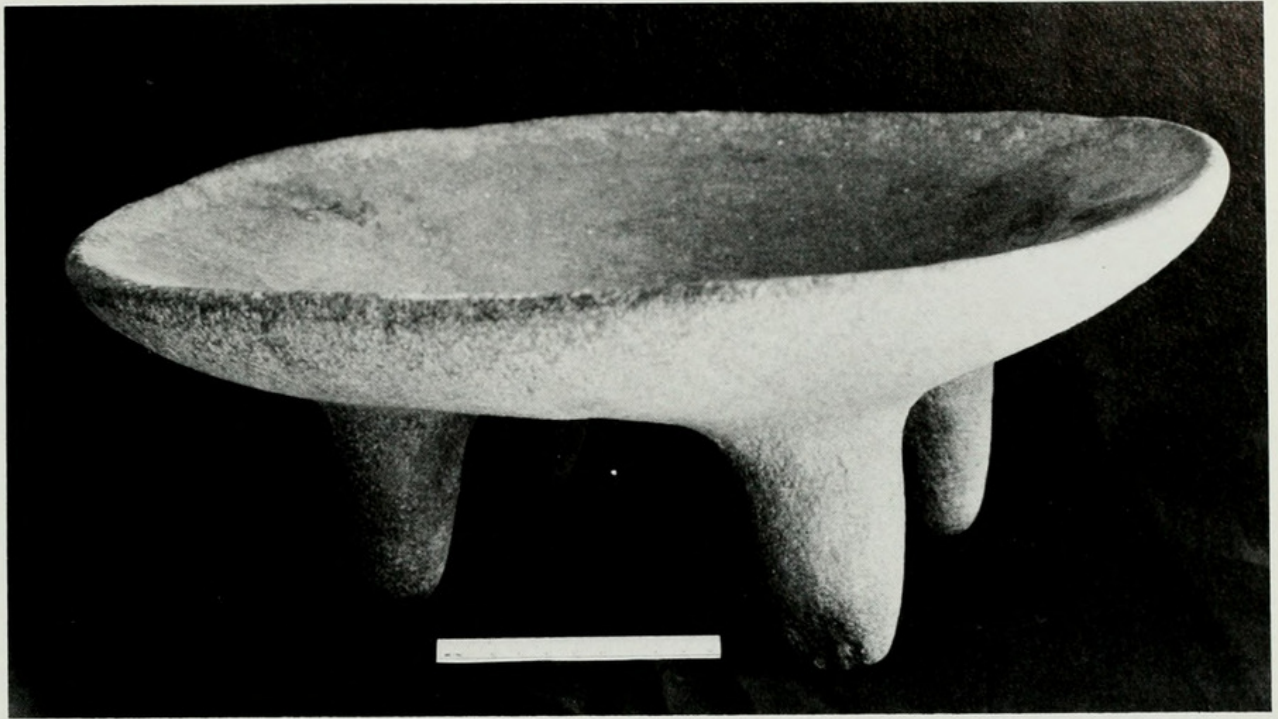
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Simplified reconstruction drawing of a late phase of Huaca de los Idolos (ca. 2750 B.C.) shows the large size of Aspero's public architecture. Central rooms with clay frieze and wall niches could be reached only by first going through larger entry rooms.

Scale: 1 inch = 10.3 meters

This finely made footed grindstone (ca. 2750 B.C.) capped a dedicatory burial on Huaca de los Sacrificios. Stonework of this quality had previously been thought to begin at least 500 years later, in early pottery-using times.



and florescence of civilization—and indeed for its very origins in most areas of the world—it does not hold with equal force for the central coast of Peru, that stretch along the Pacific Ocean from Lima to Chimbote, some 400 km to the north. There, the unusual richness of the sea allowed large concentrations of people to form stable villages in which the day-to-day contacts and conflicts of the residents resulted in the formation of the rules and controls that formed the basis of later Peruvian civilization.

Behind this seemingly minor point lurks a concept of great importance: it was not agriculture, in and of itself, that created civilization, but rather the large, stable communities that agriculture can support. If another stable, adequate food source is at hand, such as the marine and littoral resources of the central Peruvian coast, then the complex developments leading to civilization can take place.

During the first half of 1974, I directed excavations at the preceramic settlement of Aspero, in the Supe valley about 175 km to the north of Lima. Aspero is a large *midden*, or archaeological site composed of shells, fish bones, ash, sand, cooking rocks and other habitation garbage. The extreme dryness of the Peruvian coast creates a near-ideal situation for archaeology, with excellent preservation of the organic remains that rapidly decompose in more humid environments, though one can have too much of a good thing—the garbage still smells after 4,000 years! (A colleague once remarked that the great

quantity of peanut shells in another midden reminded him of Yankee Stadium after a double header.) As a result of the excellent preservation, we can easily find what the prehistoric people were eating and can recover craft items such as textiles, fish nets, and gourd containers.

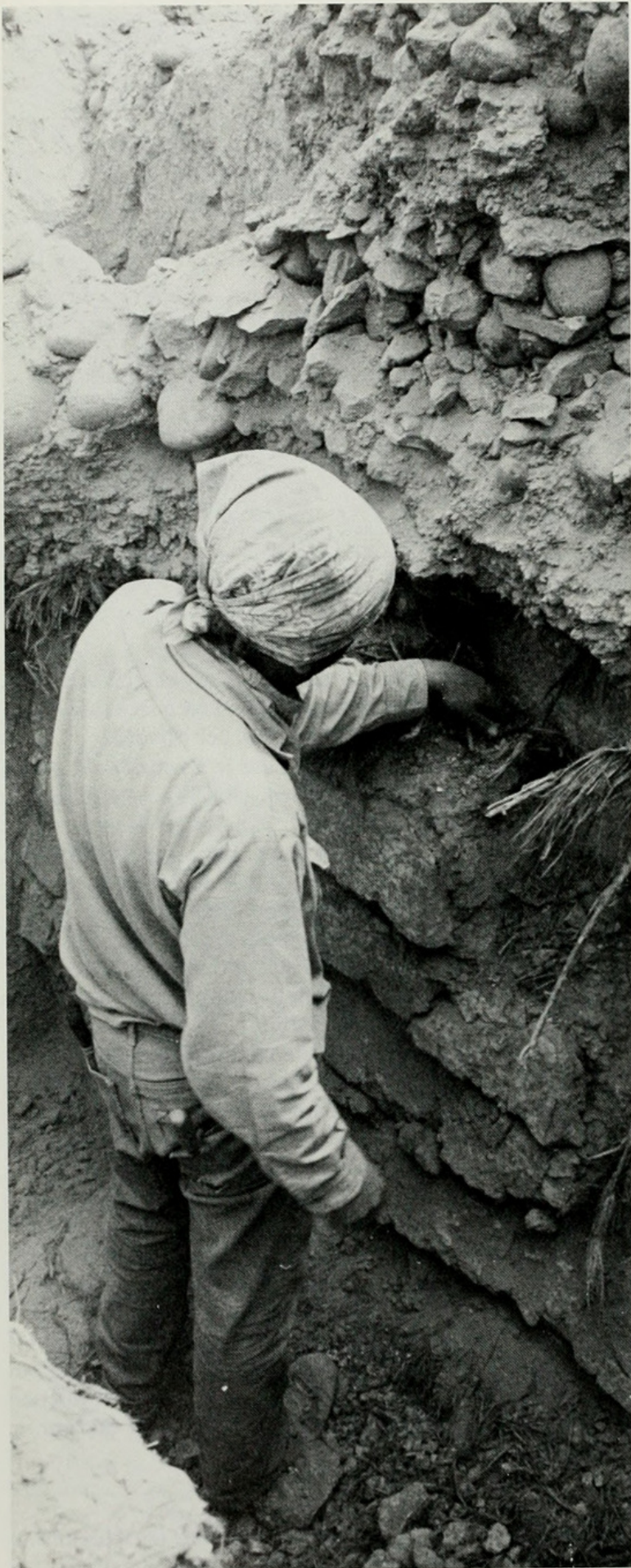
The cause of the desert dryness is a set of cold ocean currents that moving northward, cool the winds off the ocean and thus prevent rainfall. These currents are also responsible for an upwelling of nutrient-rich water from the ocean depths that creates one of the richest marine environments in the world, supporting millions of tons of anchovies. The ancient Peruvians made nets of plant fiber, including (after 3,000 B.C.) domesticated cotton, and easily harvested enough fish to support large, stable communities of hundreds of families.

Additional food came from the abundant colonies of mussels and clams on the beaches, from the birds and sea lions that preyed on the anchovies, and from the animals and plants that inhabited coastal marshes and river bottoms. In rare years abnormalities affected the currents and stopped the upwelling, thus dispersing the anchovies and poisoning the shellfish with red tides.* Rains also fell on the normally bone-dry land, so that when the sea failed, the desert bloomed, and though the times were hard, the coastal peoples survived and prospered.

The preceramic inhabitants of Aspero were not just happy fisherfolk who passively enjoyed the bounties of nature. Within their stable community they developed specialized crafts, engaged in trade over great distances,

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*Red tides are massive concentrations of toxic microorganisms that color the seawater red.



and erected monumental public buildings—in other words, these nonagricultural peoples were developing the bases of civilization.

How does the archaeologist know these things about a people dead for 4,000 years? At this point in time we must be content with the material remains of their actions, interpreting their form and distribution by analogy with recent cultures or by using the complexity or scale of the artifact as a reflection of the people behind it. Several lines of evidence must be brought together, not just from one site but from many.

For example, two small stone beads I found at Aspero—very finely shaped and made of a distinctive heat-treated red flint, a difficult material to drill small holes through—were interesting but not very enlightening in themselves. However, beads of the same stone and same fine workmanship were found at another preceramic site some 65 km south of Aspero. We can now see that the beads at both sites were probably made by the same person, a craft specialist who traded his wares from one settlement to another. The beads were not the only evidence for trade. Screening the midden yielded a small fragment of *Spondylus* seashell, whose nearest source is the tropical waters of southern Ecuador, some 1,300 km to the north.

Other foundations of civilization were also being laid. The most common artifacts that I found were cotton textiles. Preceramic textiles were usually twined rather than woven, and thus different in technique from the later tapestries and embroideries for which Precolumbian Peru is so noted; but their basic designs and such iconographic elements as symmetrical repetition of motifs and creatures such as snakes, birds, and composite-animal “monsters” first appeared in the preceramic. The central role of textiles in ceremonies, noted among the Incas, can also be seen in the preceramic. Offerings of burnt textiles placed below the floor were used to consecrate houses and temples; textiles were the most common item placed in graves with the dead, and their manufacture engaged a major part of the work of the inhabitants of Aspero.

They also built large public structures, which one is tempted to call “temples,” but this word is too loaded with connotations. I have instead called them “huacas,” an Inca word for a sacred building, object, or place, but which is now applied by archaeologists to any prehistoric mound. Whatever one labels them, it is clear that these mounds were not ordinary buildings. The largest, Huaca de los Idolos, was more than 30 by 40 meters at its base and 10 meters high. Two others were of comparable size,

Field Assistant Paul Espinosa finishes excavation of the wall frieze in the central room of Huaca de los Idolos. Rock rubble above was part of fill intentionally placed in the room prior to a rebuilding.



Huaca de los Sacrificios prior to its excavation gave little indication of the elaboration of its internal architecture.

while there were more than half a dozen smaller mounds.

When we consider the amount of work that went into building the huacas, it appears that a tremendous amount of labor was spent on tasks that brought no immediate benefits to the workers. Rooms were repeatedly rebuilt, while the old ones were partially filled in to add to the height and impressiveness of the supporting mound. The rebuildings were not needed to repair old or damaged construction; even today, after 4,000 years, the plaster still looks fresh. I feel that the rebuildings were done ceremoniously, either on a regular basis or as part of special observances of human or natural events. The labor invested was consciously expended in an extravagant manner, as if to say to the world "Look what we are capable of."

While it is doubtful that there was a full-time priesthood or bureaucracy running the show, the regularity and formality of the huacas tell us that someone was in control. This is a very significant point. One of the most important features of civilization, especially in the Andes of Peru, is that it allows a few to direct the labor of many. The pyramids of Egypt would never have been built if a committee had been in charge of the construction!

A basic feature of Andean statecraft, as shown to us by Spanish accounts of the Inca, was that taxation was in the form of labor, not goods or money. Thus, a man might have to serve in the army, or cultivate an acre of corn, or help repair a suspension bridge to pay his taxes; a woman would often be given a quantity of the state's wool to weave into cloth, her labor paying her share of her fam-

ily's taxes. The huacas at Aspero show us that 3,000 years before the Incas started their conquest of the Andean world, people were giving their labor to community projects, establishing the basic economic underpinning of Andean government.

Andean religion also traces some of its many roots back to the preceramic. The fantastic beings shown on some preceramic textiles are unmistakably related to later "deities." The wall niches, painted murals, and clay friezes that decorated the walls of the preceramic huacas continued to be important, even diagnostic, features of public buildings.

The building of huacas by centrally controlled labor groups in the preceramic might have remained just an interesting footnote to prehistory if it were not for developments that occurred at the end of the preceramic: people began to grow more of their food. While the reasons for the shift from marine fishing and collecting to farming are not yet fully known, a major factor appears to have been geological uplift of the coast, which drained the shallow bays and lagoons fished by the preceramic peoples. They were thus forced to rely more on agriculture to feed themselves.

But this change was not simple. Naturally watered farm land is rare on the desert coast, and most of that was already being used to grow cotton for textiles and nets and gourds for net floats and containers. Irrigation was needed, but to build irrigation canals requires large labor investments and a centrally coordinated work force. These were the very features developed in building the

huacas. In a sense, the preceramic peoples were “pre-adapted” for irrigation agriculture. They were thus able to rapidly open up areas of the desert and to quickly surpass the level of development attained in the preceramic, moving on to civilization.

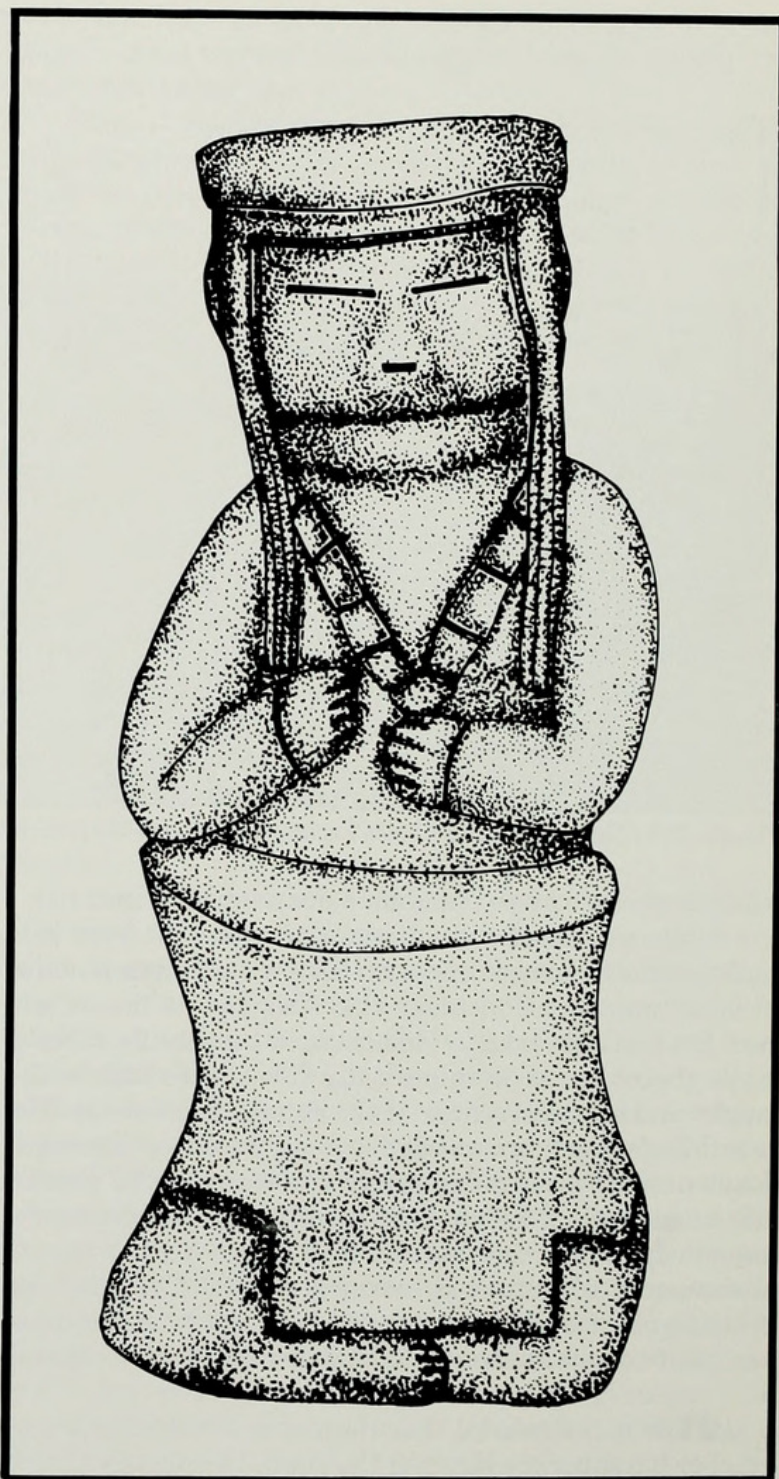
It is a fact of archaeological life that spectacular or impressive finds are few and far between. Thus, I was very lucky to encounter two such finds at Aspero. While clearing the dirt from along a wall on the Huaca de los Sacrificios, I started to discard a “loose” stone, and found to my surprise that it would not move. Clearing further, I discovered to my delight that it was really one of four legs of a finely made grindstone that covered the body of a late fetal or newborn infant adorned with more than 500 beads and two unusually large twined textiles. The burial had been carefully placed on the floor. More work revealed a second burial, this time an adult placed in alignment with the first.

The infant burial was obviously important, but what did it signify? Grave goods other than a few textiles or gourd bowls are rare in the preceramic, especially with infants, who were often simply interred in the garbage. It appears that the burials were related to the huaca, as a dedication or consecration of the structure. We know that children and llamas were sacrificed by the later coastal peoples to dedicate important structures. That the Aspero burials had a similar intent is supported by my second find: a cache of clay figurines.

Fragments of human figurines made of unfired clay had been found at other preceramic sites, so when one of the workmen began finding smoothed lumps of white clay among an unusual concentration of basketry, matting and other plant material in a small room on the Huaca de los Idolos, I instructed him to be particularly observant. The diligence paid off, as the torso and head of a little figure was soon recovered from the cache. In all, pieces of over a dozen figurines, as well as several pounds of clay lumps, were found. Most represented females, some of which appear to be pregnant. The figurines are all very similar to each other—probably the product of only one artist—but different from the figurines found at other preceramic sites.

The other contents of the cache are the same as those found in burial bundles at another settlement, where a preceramic cemetery has been excavated. It is interesting to note that some of the bundles contained no bodies, but only plant material. By analogy to this site, we can conclude that the figurines at Aspero are symbolic of sacrifices, and served to consecrate a new phase of building in the huaca.

Besides giving us this important glimpse of preceramic ceremonial activity, the figurines provide us with



Reconstruction of an Aspero figurine shows a seated man wearing a wrap-around skirt, tasseled hat, and bead necklace. Figurines from the cache in Huaca de los Idolos provide the first evidence of what early Peruvian clothing looked like when worn.

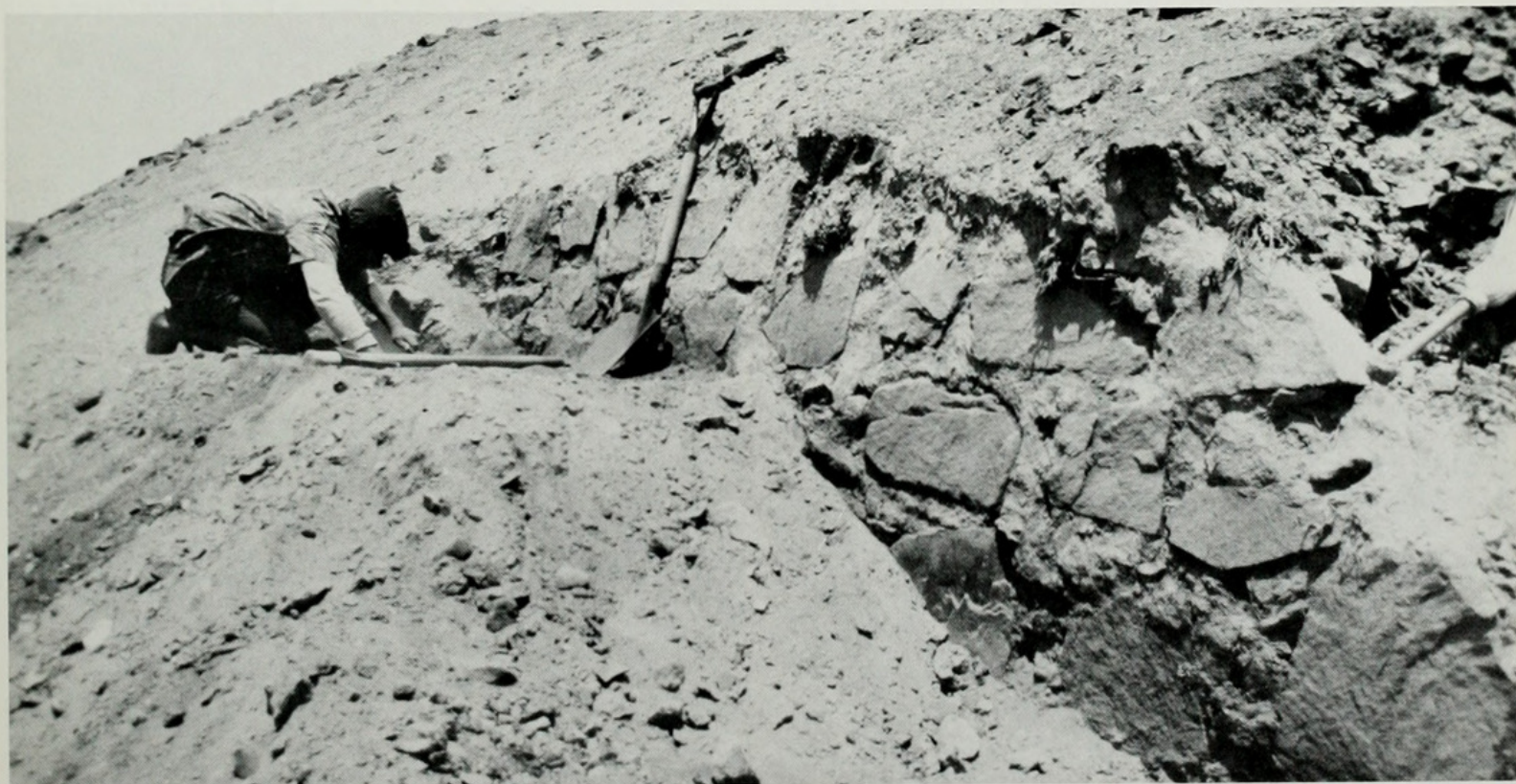
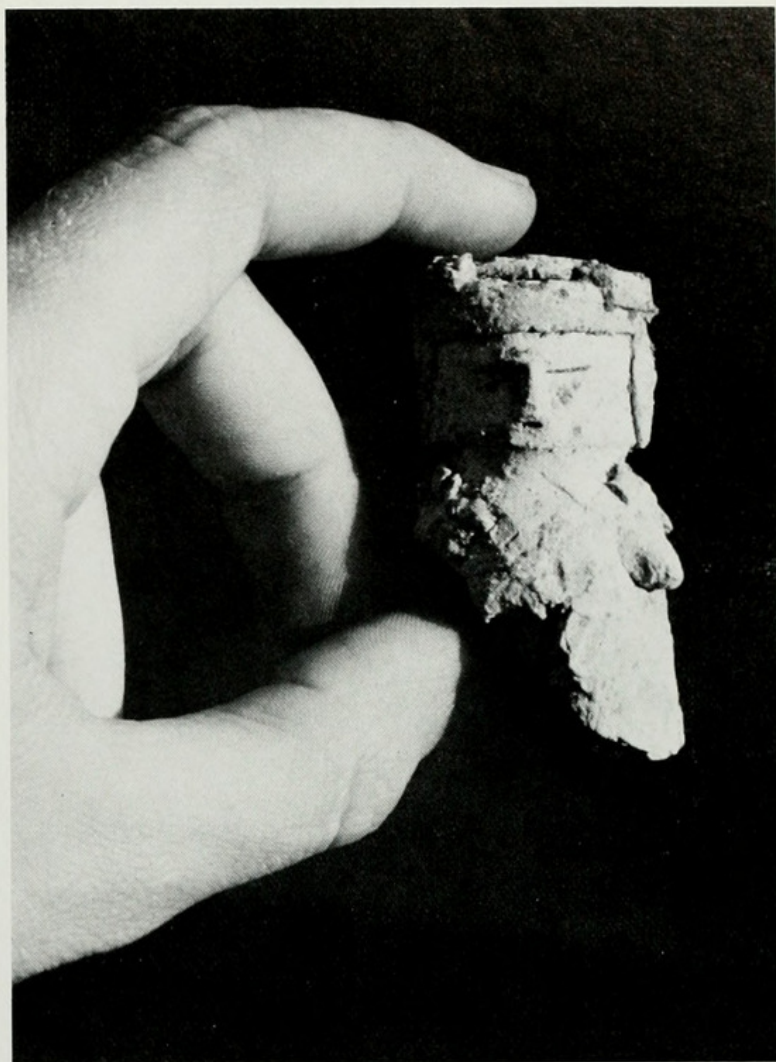
our first picture of the type of clothing worn. Large numbers of textiles have been found in the past, but most were fragmentary and none gave any clear indication of how they were used. The largest Aspero figurine, a male, is shown wearing a bead necklace (portraying the same type of red bead as the two I found), a hat with tassels or

bands falling down over the shoulders, and a peculiar skirt or kilt, swept out above the waist. Other figurines show body paint and beaded wristlets, in addition to the necklace and hat.

Evidence gathered by the excavations at Aspero show that settled village life, craft specialization, the construction of monumental public architecture, and the division of society into separate classes were all well developed in coastal Peru prior to 2,500 B.C. These important developments were similar to those taking place at the same time in the Valdivia culture of Ecuador; but significantly, unlike in Ecuador, where maize agriculture formed the subsistence base of society, Aspero was supported in the main by marine resources. It thus appears that it was not agriculture, *per se*, that led to civilization, but rather large groups of people living in close proximity for extended periods of time. By comparing the paths toward civilization in these two areas, we can begin to isolate the important forces that were at play in all areas, and develop a general theory of the origins—and hopefully, the future course—of civilization. In this way we can use the past to illuminate the present and point toward the future.

Small female figurine was the first found. Most of the figurines in the cache were female, some of which were represented as pregnant. ►

Massive size of rock walls forming Aspero mounds indicate that they were built by large organized work groups. The patterns of labor control developed during the preceramic formed the foundations of later Andean economic life. ▼





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