Chapter 10

The Destruction, Looting and Traffic of the Archaeological Heritage of Peru

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Historical background and present situation

The destruction and pillage of the native cultural heritage of Peru — a centre of high civilization in antiquity — began at the very moment of the Spanish invasion and colonization which, in the sixteenth century AD, ended its autonomous development. The *conquistadors,* aiming to obtain easy wealth, create a new order and facilitate the imposition of a new religion, destroyed temples and sanctuaries, appropriated gold ornaments from natives, and looted tombs and monuments. The fabulous ransom in gold paid by the captured Inca emperor was followed in subsequent decades by an uncontrolled 'treasure hunt' carried out by excavation 'cartels'. All palaces and temples recognized at that time were affected, with much damage done to Cuzco, the imperial capital of the Incas, and to monuments of earlier cultures. Colonial documents, including accounts for taxes to the Spanish Crown, demonstrate that such impressive quantities of gold were secured by melting down ornaments and sacred objects that the European economy was substantially altered.

These mining works led to the massive and total destruction of all sanctuaries, royal tombs and urban complexes and can be recognized today in the archaeological ruins of monuments like those at Chan Chan, capital of the Chimú culture, or the Temples of the Sun and Moon at Moche, the capital of the Mochica culture. Almost all visible architectural structures were literally ripped open in search of gold (Fig. 10.1).

Then, from the second half of the nineteenth century, there emerged a demand for archaeological material to fill the budding collections of American art — ancient or 'primitive' — in North American and European museums. Pottery, textiles, mummies, and copper objects began to have a commercial value. But, arguably, it is from the 1950s that a truly national and international traffic began to emerge and escalate in Peru, in response to growing demand from rich collectors all over the world, for whom collecting is a prestige activity, and who are copied by Peruvian bourgeoisie.

From the 1960s steady looting supplied a varied range of Peruvian collections — from small local collections in the capital and major cities, to specialized ones, like the so-called 'Gold of Peru'. This demand shaped the organization of a network of local suppliers, provincial and international illegal dealers, who exported highly valuable archaeological material from the capital to international markets with absolute ease. Clearly, collecting — the true cause of looting and destruction of archaeological sites — is part of a single interconnected problem, where we cannot deny the link with global speculative manipulation, even though some consistently argue that national collectors, by acquiring objects, patriotically prevent them from leaving the country. Our experience in Peru demonstrates that, except in two or three cases, a great number of collections formed between the 1960s and 1980s have actually disappeared, being absorbed into the trade, and it is not possible to explain convincingly the sources of money which are needed for the regular acquisitions of the few collections which continue to grow.

The archaeological site of Batan-Grande deserves special consideration. Consisting of 20 pyramidal buildings constructed of mud-brick and extensive cemeteries covering an area of over 50 square kilometres, it must have been the political and religious centre of the Lambayeque or Sicán culture. Between 1940 and 1968, this sanctuary was looted by the landowners, who employed teams of workers and heavy machinery to open wide, deep trenches in the cemeteries close to the pyramids. The result of what could be considered the most exten-

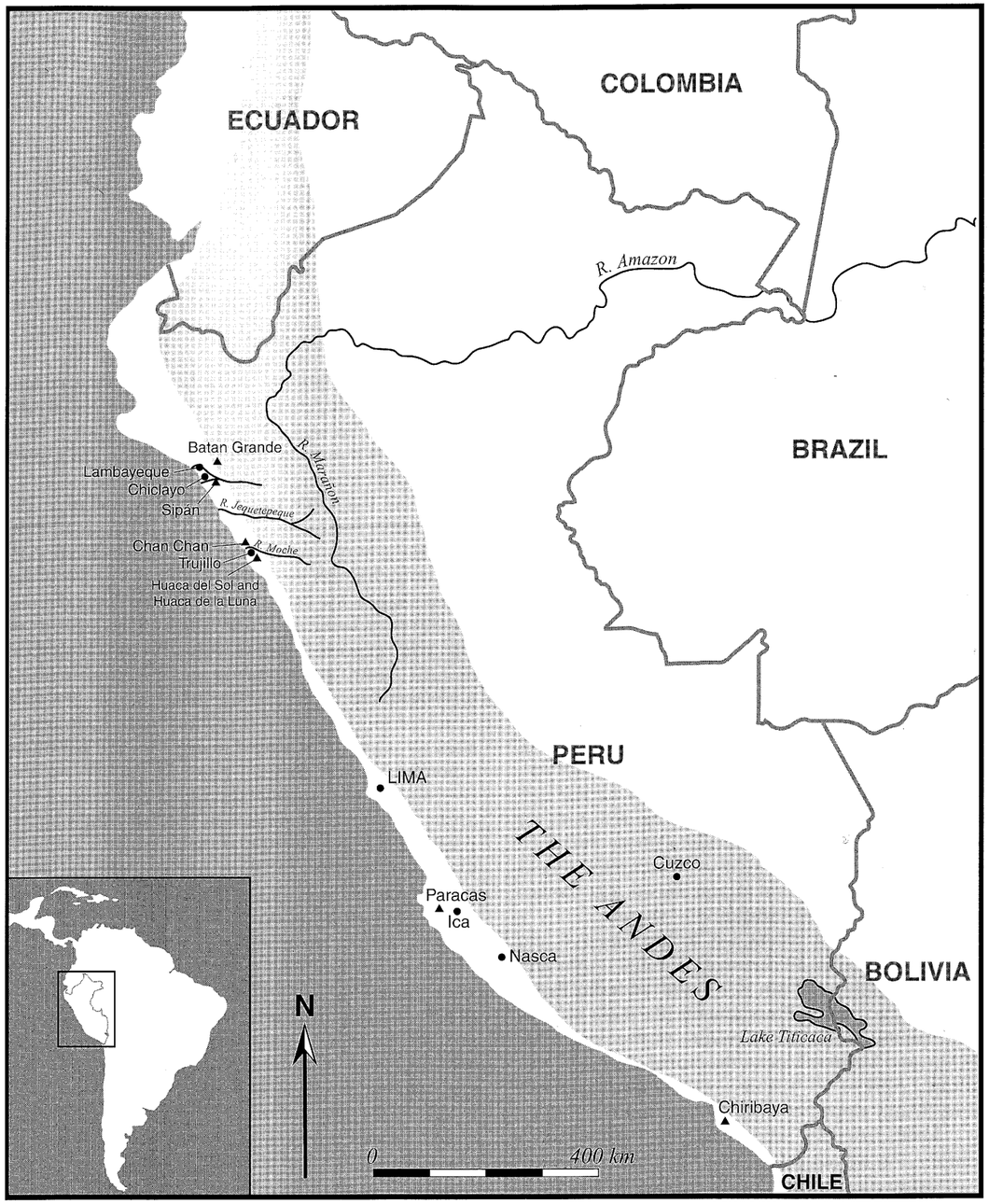

Figure 10.1. *Map of Peru.*

sive and intensive pillage in the New World was nearly 100,000 looters' holes. Some of the rich funerary goods looted were sold to major museums in Peru and abroad, who have not hesitated to put them on display. The pieces which had been damaged by the digging machinery ended up at the forge. This plunder of what was apparently fabulous material, reached its highest point with a tomb robbed in 1965 which produced 40 kg of gold. Information gathered recently corroborates this, in the form of photographs given to the author not long ago by the sons of the actual looter. Taken during the looting in order to sell the pieces, they show a variety of objects (most now found in the Gold of Peru museum and collections abroad) divided into lots. The dozens of vases, funerary masks and ceremonial knives in the pictures — all made of gold, and weighing up to a one and a half kilogrammes per piece — verify how extraordinary this particular looting episode was. It is possible to estimate that the amazing finds from this site, now scattered all over the world, make up approximately 90 per cent of all the archaeological gold attributed to ancient Peru.

The effects of looting

Within the geographical diversity of Peru it can be calculated that there are approximately 200,000 monuments and archaeological sites, belonging to diverse cultures and with 4000 years of history, but which are not specifically registered. All of them, however, including the furthest or most overgrown, have been partially affected by looting — an activity which was, until recently, considered almost as a part of a folk tradition or a national sport.

Examination of photographic archives and air photographs of the 1930s, reveals that more archaeological evidence was pillaged and destroyed in the last 50 years of the twentieth century than in the preceding four centuries. The intensity and extension of looting is related directly to demand and to the nature of the looted materials. The north coast of Peru has traditionally provided gold objects and pottery belonging to the pre-Inca cultures of Chavin, Mochica, Lambayeque and Chimú. The central coast has supplied textiles, pottery and mummies (Nazca and Paracas), and the last decades have seen the black market flooded with textiles from the south coast Chiribaya and Inca cultures, of which we archaeologists know hardly anything.

Along with the endemic and constant looting, which is hard to control, it is also possible to recognize periodic phenomena or events of localized looting. These start in a restricted area but progress quickly to cause massive devastation of specific sites or extensive archaeological areas, with organized groups of looters from up to 1000 km away converging with the local populations on a site until the archaeology is totally exhausted. Obviously, these cases create a brief economic boom which, for a while, changes the local way of life. But the counterbalance of the phenomenon is the total destruction of all archaeological contexts and of their historical contents. Between 1960–68 cemeteries of the Vicus period, an archaeological culture unknown until then, were totally obliterated when a province was extended by approximately 700 square kilometres. Illegal traders inundated the antiquities market with an estimated 10,000 ceramic and metal objects in this unusual artistic style. Objects like shields, breastplates and spears weighing up to two to three kilogrammes each, were melted down because the copper and gilded copper from which they were made was of low value to collectors.

Between 1966 and 1976, the archaeology of the whole Jequetepeque valley was totally razed because of booming demand for vessels and early materials of the Chavin culture, until then rare in collections in Peru and abroad. The appearance on the market of the spoils from thousands of plundered tombs did not fail to have an effect. The most artistically spectacular pieces earned unthinkable local prices of up to US$1000, a genuine fortune for poor peasants whose average salaries were less than US$3. (Alan Lapiner's 1972 art book, *Pre-Colombian Art of South America*, constitutes the most exquisite and selective compilation of objects looted and illegally exported during this time). In this case it is also possible to recognize the 'sieve' effect which demythologizes the role of national collectors, since the most spectacular pieces always end up in foreign museum or collections, despite having first passed through the hands of several collectors and illegal traders in Peru. This looting episode affected a valley 80 km wide, stretching from the Andes to the sea. Valuable archaeological information which could have clarified the nature, origin and religion of the first examples of Peruvian high culture, and the relationships between them, has been irretrievably lost. The neighbouring Zefia valley suffered a similar fate between 1974 and 1984. Evidently these looting phenomena are directly fuelled by an active smuggling network, which mobilizes resources and has such influence that recognized centres of population become public markets.

The nature and extent of the illicit trade was

made known for the first time in 1968 when a national scandal implicated many local dignitaries and made possible the recovery of almost 20,000 archaeological artefacts. The material had been gathered from all over the country and was brought to Lima for immediate export, which was expedited by a system of codes and photographic archives. Also seized were official documentation and files on 'collectors'. The organization which ran the enterprise maintained offices, vehicles, storage facilities, and a clandestine excavation campsite in the desert area of Ica. Two of the people implicated were owners of reputable antiques shops in the centre of Lima, and others were respected members of high society. Law suits and public scandal made an impact on the *modus operandi* but left supply channels untouched. The illicit trade became more selective and discreet.

Interventions during the last few years demonstrate that organizations devoted to the illicit trade have diversified their activities, restructured their networks of intermediaries and been sheltered by weaknesses in Peruvian law, which allows the ownership and transfer of cultural assets within the country. The last two important seizures of Peruvian archaeological material by Customs authorities in Miami (1995) and at Lima Airport (1996) demonstrate similarities in both character and content: they consisted of shipments of hundreds of archaeological artefacts of gold and copper, textiles, feather ornaments, and even mummies' heads ripped from their bodies. The objects come from diverse cultures and regions of the country. Each collection would be enough for the creation of an exhibition or private museum; they seem to be orders placed from abroad, whose fulfillment required significant investment, time, contacts and logistical resources. The way they were packaged indicates experience in handling works of art, and scandalously, the intervention of professional restorers for the handling of the textile items, which were the bulk of both shipments. In each lot, pieces were recognized which were registered in private collections, and even published in art books. The relationship between private collector and illegal trader is thus clear.

Police investigations found that these export consignments were officially labeled 'Peruvian crafts' and were en-route to Switzerland, via local middlemen who organized 'ghost' businesses and false documentation. The Peruvian police have also reported on the organization of shipments to another individual. Pieces belonging to a well-known collector, who had been associated for the last 30 years with specialist reports, valuations and smuggling of archaeological materials (he was implicated in the 1968 case), appeared in each case. In 1996 the collector was brutally murdered, a crime which remains unsolved but which was clearly connected with the smuggling mafia, as it seems that the ownership of an important collection of gold artefacts played a role.

The case of Sipán

Initial looting (in 1987) of the Mochica ceremonial site of Sipán which was halted just in time, and the subsequent immediate archaeological intervention by the Museo Nacional Brüning de la Región, forms our best case study for estimating the volume and importance of archaeological information being lost because of looting, as opposed to the possibilities offered by scientific retrieval. For the first time archaeologists had the opportunity to examine intact tombs of high-ranking ancient personages, which produced unprecedented cultural treasures and valuable information about the level of political organization, art and technology of the Mochica culture. During the last ten years the author, and his teams, have excavated about a dozen Mochica tombs, each containing an average of 500 gold, silver and gold-plated objects.

Knowledge of the diverse funerary attire of Mochican royalty has enabled us to reformulate our understanding of this culture, to work out the structure of the highest level of Mochican society, and to recognize the individual role of each person buried. More than 50,000 specimens of Mochica art in collections and museums worldwide can now be considered in a new light, thanks to the clues generated by the contextual recovery of these tombs.

Global attention and international exhibitions have created new perspectives on Peruvian history, with an emphasis on the value of national and regional identities. New research and archaeological projects have also been stimulated, establishing the need for new regional museums, and promoting tourism which brings along benefits for the local communities involved.

The international press speculated that the Sipán discoveries were the richest ancient tombs in the New World (see *National Geographic:* Alva 1988; 1990). Other sections of the media dubbed the find the 'Tutankhamen' of the Americas. Archaeologists can see, however, that solitary Mochica artefacts already known, must, because of their similarity to Sipán pieces, have come from burials of similar magnificence, which had been violently destroyed during previous decades.

At Sipán it was clear that, prior to the archaeological intervention, looters had ransacked a royal tomb, the contents of which were immediately spirited onto the black market and, because looted items from the site are so indentifiable, it is possible to uncover the extent and level of international smuggling (Fig. 10.2). In 1988 investigations in Los Angeles caused a scandal when Customs agents raided several collectors who had acquired smuggled pieces from an individual who had — unusually for an illicit dealer — bought them directly in Peru. Some of these pieces are now in a collection in Chile and others in lesser-known collections in Switzerland and Germany. Finally, in Peru, an Italian collector bought most of the material, gaining protection under Peru's weak laws by officially registering it.

In light of the Los Angeles case, our immediate coordination and negotiations, in 1990 the US government promulgated an emergency law to restrict the entry of Mochican artefacts from Sipán into the US. This law has now been superseded by the present Memorandum of Understanding ratified in 1997, which restricts the import into the US of all Pre-Columbian archaeological artefacts and colonial ethnological material from Peru without proper certification from the government of Peru.

In 1997, the Sipán case became news once more with the recovery of a spectacular piece of gold armour looted from the tomb: a royal 'backflap' weighing 1.3 kg (Frontispiece). It turned up for sale in the United States for US$1,600,000, but was retrieved thanks to good intelligence and excellent work by the Philadephia FBI who identified three smugglers. Amazingly, one of them was the Panamanian Consul-General in New York, who had moved the backflap into the US by means of his diplomatic bag. The investigation also implicated three well-known members of the Peruvian business community and a former police officer.

The above-mentioned cases demonstrate the evolution of the modern illicit trade in objects of cultural value — the major cause of pillage of archaeological monuments — and the finely-tuned level it has reached. Today sophisticated criminal organizations exist, which operate in social, political and diplomatic spheres, and involve the police and business community in Peru, as well as worldwide.

Value of the trade

The first link in the illicit chain is the looters themselves, called *huaqueros*. They are of peasant origin, organized in small bands, but do not make enough money to improve their standard of living; most of the profits are made by regional middlemen and traders in the capital who offer contraband to the most important national and international collectors. This can be seen in the example of the Sipán backflap. It was acquired from local dealers in the city of Chiclayo for US$80,000 and sold on to a dealer in the capital for US$150,000. He organized for it to be smuggled to the USA, intending to share the ultimate sale price of US$1,600,000 with his contacts there. Another case is that of a distinctive formative pot of outstanding artistic quality, depicting an 'auto-sacrifice', which was acquired by a local collector for US$1500, sold to an international dealer for US$15,000 and finally arrived in Los Angeles with a price tag of US$30,000.

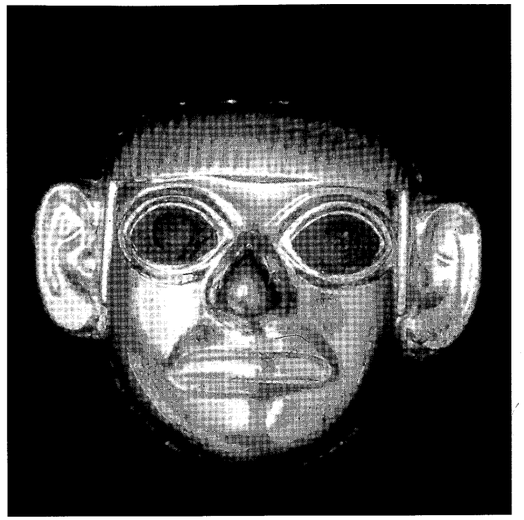

Figure 10.2. *Gold and lapis-lazuli mask looted from Tomb 1 at Sipán (Photo: Projecto Tumbas Reales de Sipán.)*

Art market auctions determine the values and preferences of the black market. For instance, Peruvian textiles are now big business and have fetched extraordinary sums. In October 1987, a cotton and wool shirt from a Paracas culture grave was sold at auction at Sotheby's, New York for US$270,000 (but was repatriated when the Peruvian government sued for its return). Recent sales catalogues from Sotheby's and Christie's feature many fine Nasca and Paracas textiles: a very small funerary mantle was offered for US$270,000 not long ago, but Paracas graves often contain much bigger mantles, up to four metres long and exquisitely worked and decorated all over

with fine mythological figures. These are now worth at least US$1–2 million dollars each which explains why, in 1995, a mantle like this was stolen to order from the Museo Nacional in Lima, and later found at the airport ready to smuggled from the country.

The major obstacles faced when claiming pieces found in auction houses or collections is establishing the date of entry into countries which respect international agreements or in proving they have been stolen from a museum or archaeological site. This is often an almost impossible task since the objects are obviously the product of clandestine excavation. These difficulties are typified by the case of two disputed pieces in a museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The museum refuses to return these objects, even though they are distinctive, until Peru can prove that these pieces were definitely looted from Sipán. But, of course, when an object is looted we do not know how it was looted. It is a difficult situation.

The example of material originating from the remote and mountainous region of the Marañon River should be mentioned here. This outstanding formative pottery comes from a culture unknown to Peruvian archaeologists, but is today offered for sale through photographs in England, Switzerland and Denmark. This seems to indicate localized and well-organized looting activity, organized from abroad by means of targeted looting 'expeditions'.

The stucture of the trade

There is definite evidence that trafficking of antiquities is linked, in some sectors, to the drugs trade, sale of crafts and to the tourism business. At least two well-known north coast dealers were implicated in drugs cases. In another case, during the arrest of a regional *capo*, some archaeological pieces were confiscated which had probably been acquired for money laundering purposes.

As regards the production, sale and export of crafts, craftspeople frequently incorporate archaeological material into their creations. Well-known jewellers in Lima use archaeological objects, such as beads, antique turquoise and lapiz lazuli mounts, and fragments are cut out from ancient textiles to decorate souvenirs. Part of this craft network includes street sellers who offer to tourists necklaces with an archaeological provenance, small pieces of textile and ceramics. The workshops at Chancay, near Lima, are famous. There, genuine ancient textiles, from diverse sources, are cut and mounted to make distinctive dolls like those of the Chancay culture, which are proffered to the public.

In other cases fakes — of wood carvings, bone artefacts and embroidered mantles — are made using materials obtained from tombs. This kind of recycling destroys the archaeological objects. It is known that in Lima, as well as in major cities, there are workshops dedicated to this type of counterfeiting, and also of course to forging ceramic and golden artefacts from scratch. Some police operations have identified fake ceremonial knives or idols in which some pre-Hispanic gold has been used. (Another trick of the trade is to cover with plaster an archaeological vessel and repaint it with a modern design in order to disguise and smuggle the piece.)

The seizures of illicit antiquities in the USA, together with the subsequent scandals and international agreements have acted to alter substantially the traditional smuggling routes to that country, and have probably decreased demand too. Now the preferred option for trafficking antiquities — by air or sea — is toward the northern and central European countries, with Switzerland and northern France being destinations around which the international trade is triangulated. (I was not pleased, but surprised, to learn that Italy has the same problem as Peru: that Switzerland seems to be the broker of antiquities). The terrestrial routes most often used to deceive Peruvian airport Customs are through Chile and Bolivia. We have no agreement with the former and the international borders with the latter easily allow transportation. Brazil has emerged as a recipient of cultural material, especially ethnographic and colonial art. There are indications that Japan might also have become an important destination for archaeological material, which is then dispersed discreetly and anonymously through dealers, hence the lack of information on this development.

Possible solutions

In Peru, as is probably the case in other countries which suffer from looting of their archaeological heritage to feed the demand of collectors, the solution would be to paralyze the market by applying immediate legal measures and deciding to end the illicit trade network in which it is generally possible to identify the most important people. Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to demarcate the ethical boundaries of activities that involve the study of ancient art, its aesthetic recreation and the desire to own pre-Hispanic works of art as symbols of social prestige which, in the last few years, has shifted towards the simple acquisition of capital goods which will gradually increase in commercial value.

In view of the desperate situation regarding the looting and destruction of archaeological heritage, the last few years have seen prominent members of Peru's cultural and academic communities show their growing concern about looting and the illicit trade. There is a strong current of opinion in favour of the drafting of a new law. Since 1996 this topic has been the theme for some 20 symposia and national events, but no consensus or decision has been reached which would be necessary to bring about a change. It should be mentioned that under the current law there are such significant contradictions and ambiguities that no case of looting, destruction or smuggling has led to a prison sentence for a criminal.

In October 1999, an international symposium entitled Fighting the Traffic of Objects of Cultural Heritage, was held in Cuzco. It was an important exchange of opinions between institutions from South American countries involving the police and law enforcement and specialist organizations along with representatives from the USA, England, France, Italy, China and Indonesia.

At the national level, the Peruvian police have only one small department with responsibility for the safety of monuments and curbing the illicit trade in cultural material. Severe limitations in personnel and resources make extending these activities throughout the whole of the country impossible. We have proposed the formation of a specialized unit that could do an efficient job dealing with the volume, extent and complexity of Peruvian cultural heritage and the criminal activity which is rapidly bringing about its destruction.

At a local level, the attitude of the population towards archaeological heritage differs from region to region — from complete disregard to or complicity with looting, to remarkable examples of respect and participation in protection initiatives. It depends on the ethnic composition and ancestral rooting of the population, the impact of looting and the illicit trade, and the efforts of museums and cultural institutions. In northern areas, long-term national archaeological projects are generating increasing awareness and several positive experiences. For example, at Sipán local villagers (who were in fact the looters of the site) were extremely resentful when the official excavation first began and it quickly turned into a battle. But the archaeologists managed to weave around the first big tomb — which contained 'El Señor de Sipán' — a myth which has caught the imagination of the public. Local people see the find as something of importance, associated with the pride of their village. And now this has created a phenomenon in Peru; every locality wants to have its own 'Señor' — people talk to the archaeologists digging at Moche about having a 'Señor de Moche', and so on.

Since 1993, our museum — the Museo Nacional Brüning de la Región — has been developing a Programme of Protection of Archaeological Monuments, co-ordinating with the regional police. Thanks to this programme the number of vandals at some sites has declined from more than one hundred to a furtive few, networks of local dealers have been broken up and approximately 3200 archaeological artefacts have been confiscated. After initial suppressive action, the Programme helped create organizations of peasant volunteers who watch over monuments in their districts. Nowadays we have eight groups with a total of 350 members in three valleys in the region. The local paper has played an important part in this experience, carrying out a constant education and information campaign reporting on news about the progamme, interviews and articles about the value

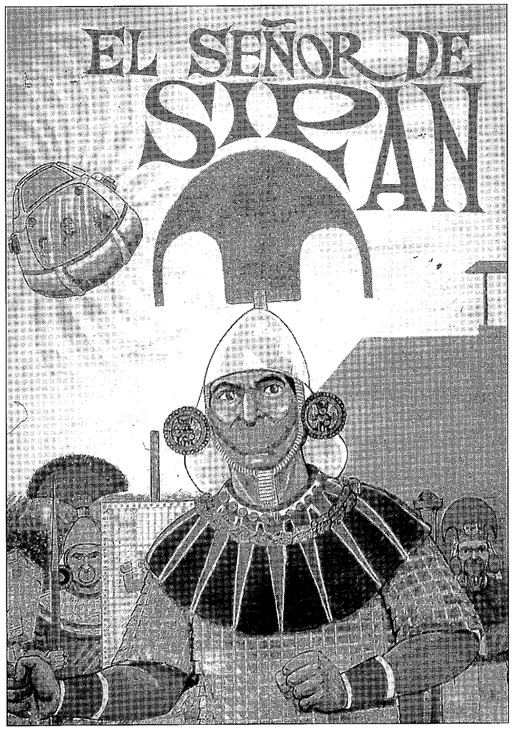

Figure 10.3. *Comic book about Sipán (Photo: Projecto Tumbas Reales de Sipán.)*

and importance of the cultural heritage. Other, similar, programmes of community involvement have been developed in an Andean locality near Kuntur Wasi in association with an archaeological project from Tokyo University. It is true to say that, where a project begins, the pillage ends.

The international exhibition of material excavated at Sipán also enabled the author to create a series of educational products to raise awareness about the importance of archaeological heritage. These include a comic book (Fig. 10.3) about the Mochica culture and Sipán, and two CD-ROMs with 3-D animations and video clips. One is an real archaeological venture into the site, the other more broadly based on Mochica culture.

The common task we must take on as professional and scientific organizations should be aimed at promoting, at both governmental and individual level, an awareness of archaeological context as a historical source of unique character. It can sustain the identities of nations and can be a potential resource which, if properly used, can be a means to their development. The thrust of an international campaign, similar to those organized to save the environment or endangered wildlife, would yield better results under the premise that those who acquire archaeological objects participate in a cultural crime and propitiate the irreversible destruction of the history of humanity.

Acknowledgements

The text was translated from the original Spanish by Elisa Vargas, Steve Bourget and Jenny Doole.

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