

# Chancay Culture

**C**hancay arose in the Chancay and Chillón valleys immediately after the Huari collapse around 900 CE, and gradually spread to the neighboring Lurín, Rimac, Huaura, Supe, Pativilca, and Fortaleza valleys on the central Peruvian coast. It can best be understood as a small regional state without the more complex administrative bureaucracies of some of its immediate neighbors, including the Chimú, or the Inka empire which absorbed the Chancay sometime between about 1420–1450 CE.

Chancay pottery is mold-made, white-slipped and painted with mineral pigments before being fired in a simple oxidizing (oxygen-rich) environment. Most pottery does not appear to have been made in the larger, state-controlled workshops typical of more complex polities. In fact, some scholars have argued that Chancay may have had a very different kind of social organization, a horizontally-integrated structure in which a series of neighboring polities coordinated economic activities as insurance against droughts, floods and other environmental disasters. Instead of managing risks by centralizing production and maximizing surplus, such societies would have ameliorated risks by spreading them across multiple environments and communities.



***Cuchimilco* Figurine**

Chancay, ca. 1200–1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 61.54.9)

Figurines of this kind, called *cuchimilcos*, are guardian forms characteristic of Chancay culture. Almost always shown with upraised arms, *cuchimilco* figures tend to be female, or found paired with one figure of each sex. They may be burial goods, and some scholars suggest they're guardian figures serving an apotropaic function; Chancay also produced funerary "dolls," usually made of woven textiles and stuffed with reed or fiber.

Like many forms of pre-Columbian pottery, *cuchimilco* figures are now on the ICOM Red List of endangered antiquities, whose trafficking is restricted or prohibited by treaty.



**Anthropomorphic Vessel with *Kero* Cup**

Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 67.156)

*Kero* (or *quiru*) are cups used for feasts; in later periods they are usually paired, so that two people could simultaneously drink *chicha*, a corn beer, from identical vessels. Rather than everyday vessels for drinking, they appear to be prestige goods used to signify and reaffirm social relations, whether between individuals or between subjects and rulers. At major centers like Tiwanaku rulers are portrayed holding *kero* cups in one hand and snuff in the other.

*Kero* were also used as libation cups in religious ceremonies, reaffirming the relationships between communities and their gods. In some iconography maize plants grow directly from the *kero*, suggesting that the libations and offerings poured from the *kero* assured the productivity of agricultural fields.



### **Zoomorphic Vessel in Shape of a Dog**

Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 67.152)

It's not known whether the shape of this zoomorphic dog pot reflects the characteristics of the breed being depicted, or the stylistic conventions of Chancay ceramic art. A now-lost breed of short-legged, long-bodied, llama-herding dog is known from a set of forty-two well-preserved dog mummies discovered at a Chiribaya site south of Chancay. Archaeologist Sonia Guillén suggests that these dogs were accorded high status in death, just as were the humans with whom they were buried.

Spanish chroniclers describe six different breeds of dogs in Peru at the time of contact; the best-known surviving breed is the larger and lankier Peruvian Hairless Dog, currently recognized by the Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI), and the similar Peruvian Inca Orchid, recognized by the American Kennel Club.



**Vessel with Geometric Motifs**

Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 67.157)

The upper portion of this vessel may depict one of the complex textiles for which Chancay is famous, with the lower register showing the fringe or unfinished warp.

Many human effigy figures have similar decorative patterns where it is clear that a textile blanket or shawl is being depicted; in many cases preserved textiles and these painted designs on pottery bear the same motifs. It is possible that vessels like these represent one end of an increasingly abstracted and stylized continuum from more recognizably anthropomorphic forms (see 67.156) to vessels like these.



**Vessel with Geometric Motifs**

Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 62.64.2)

Almost lost in the regular geometric pattern of this egg-shaped vessel is a small applique of an animal, either a monkey or a feline; both figure prominently in Chancay weaving. When initially catalogued the zoomorph was identified as a feline, but the treatment of the eyes is more characteristic of how monkeys are usually portrayed. Chancay ceramics are generally white or cream slipped vessels painted with dark brown, black or reddish pigments; in many cases—as here—the pigment is thick and friable, resulting in small areas of loss.



### **Zoomorphic Effigy in the Shape of a Bird**

Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 91.301)

This effigy probably represents the Humboldt penguin (*Spheniscus humboldti*), which breeds in the coastal areas of Chile and Peru. Breeding areas produce rich guano deposits, used as fertilizer in ancient Peru since at least the Middle Horizon period (600-1000 CE).

Just as the coastal civilizations of Peru lived in a world of extremes—arid deserts along a deep-sea coast, dissected by irrigated verdant valleys—so too do Humboldt penguins. Daytime temperatures can exceed 108 degrees, and they feed in the cold upwelling waters of the Humboldt current; as a result, this species has bare patches of skin that “blush,” allowing it to better regulate its temperature.

While the future of Humboldt penguins in the wild remains uncertain—they’re threatened by hunting, accidental drowning in fishing nets, depletion of habitat, and overfishing of their food stocks—a thriving colony is nearby at the Saint Louis Zoo.



**Zoomorphic Vessels in the Form of a Quadruped**

Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 91.302 above; 91.298 below)

Vast herds of llama and alpaca were maintained in the pre-Columbian Andes, each with specific properties of wool. Wool production and weaving were not simply household tasks but state-controlled industries, and long-term breeding programs produced a range of camelid wools in specific textures, colors, and weights. Between 1535-1600 CE, following European contact, more than 90% of these flocks were destroyed, and the corresponding wool types lost.

Piebald coats are a feature of only the domesticated species: llama and alpaca; not the wild taxa; guanaco and vicuña.





**Zoomorphic Vessel in the Form of a Quadruped**

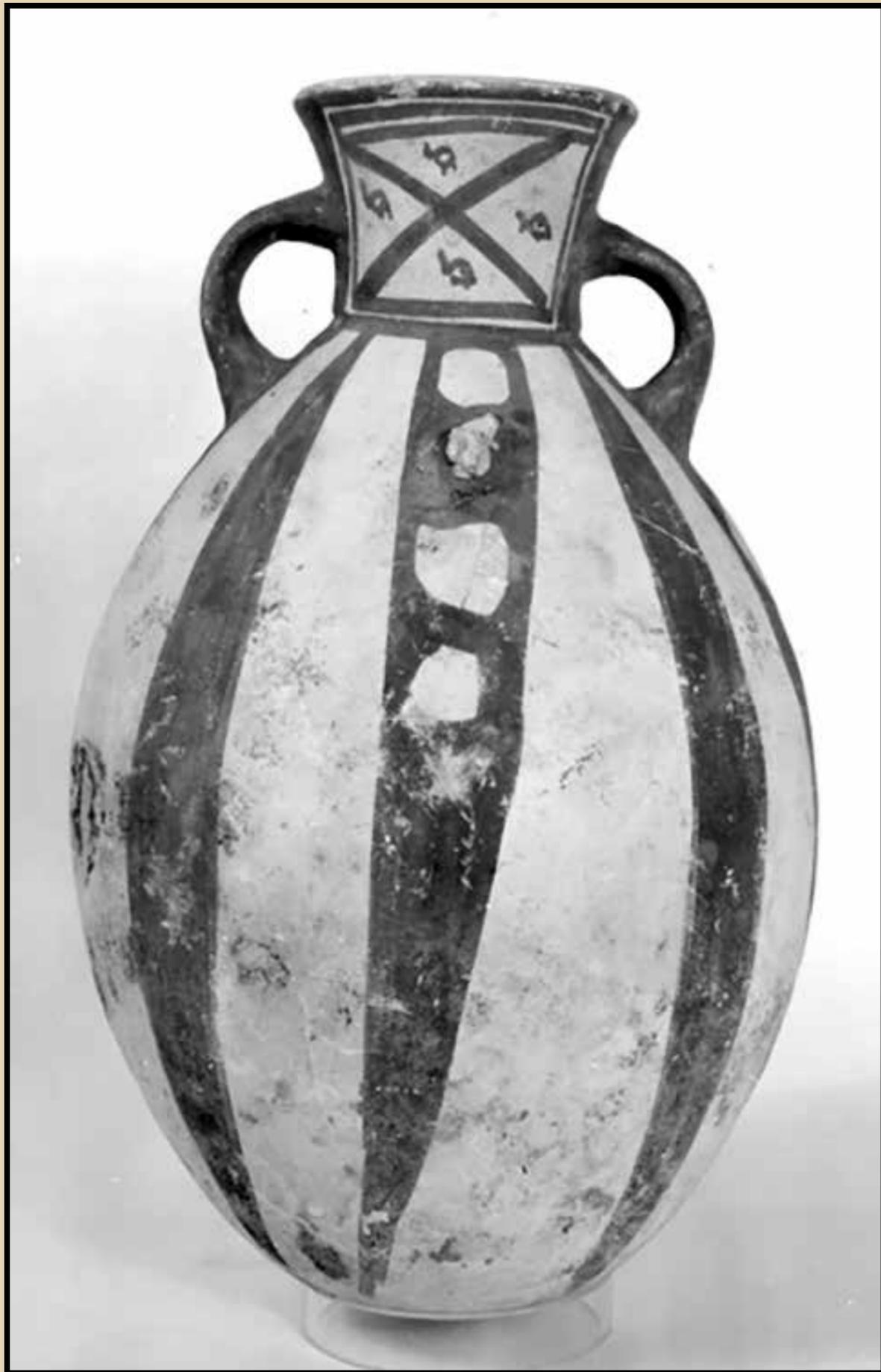
Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 91.303)

This quadruped, presumably a camelid, is decorated with the complex textile motifs which would have been woven from its wool; it wears what it will become.

In later Inka times sumptuary laws forbade any but royalty from wearing vicuña wool, the finest of the camelid wools. A rare resource, the vicuña could only be sheared once every three to four years, and each vicuña produces only about one pound of wool. Vicuña wool remains something reserved for the elite: as of October 2020 the retailer Ermenegildo Zegna sells a vicuña-wool windbreaker for \$36,900.



**Vessel with Loop Handles**

Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 67.154)

Four small figures occupy the quarters of the rim panel on this squash-shaped vessel; a fifth is added as an applique on the body of the vessel. The design is repeated on the opposite side.

Squash were early domesticates in Peru and were used as both food and food containers. A team of archaeologists (including Deborah Pearsall and Robert Benfer of the University of Missouri) found non-cucurbit starch grains inside squash rinds, including manioc, potato, arrowroot, chile, and carob at the Buena Vista site, a central Peruvian preceramic site dating to 2200 BCE.



**Statuette of a Standing Figure Wearing a Headdress**

Chancay, ca. 1000-1470 CE

Terracotta

(MAA 2009.225)

Relatively simple, mold-made forms like this one were mass-produced by Chancay potters, then decorated with slips and mineral-based pigments. The front and back molds allow the creation of basic shapes—here the legs are indicated in low relief rather than as separate elements. The relatively modest modeling is accentuated by painted designs.

Hollow, mold-made statuettes like this one need to be pierced so they don't explode during firing; in this case the statuette is pierced on both sides along the mold joins. These piercings, and the piercing of the ears, may also have allowed organic decorations to be attached to the statuette.