

## CHAVIN BUTTERFLIES; A TENTATIVE INTERPRETATION

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Although the study of the art and artistic conventions of an ancient people is often undertaken as a worthy subject in itself, it is becoming increasingly apparent that such studies are also valuable because of the information which they may yield on many aspects of ancient life. The relationship between art and religion is obvious, and iconographic studies have commonly been used not only to reconstruct ancient theological systems but to detail their origin and spread. However, it is also becoming evident that the art of an ancient people may hold keys to economic and political as well as symbolic systems. The work of Lathrap on Chavín (1971, 1977) and of Linares on Coclé (1977) has made this aspect of iconographic studies abundantly clear. In this context the correct identification of plant and animal species depicted in an ancient art style becomes extremely important, since it is these depictions that offer a key to the understanding of the economic and social ties of a past culture.

An excellent example of the importance of animal and plant representations to a wider understanding of the past is provided by recent work on the Chavín civilization of northern Peru. Here the identification of a series of different species has provided new insights into the origins of early contacts of this first major civilization of the central Andes and of the role of hallucinogenic substances in its religion as well as possible explanations of the attraction that the Chavín religion seems to have held for other peoples of ancient Peru (Cordy-Collins, 1977; Lathrap, 1971; 1977). Considering the importance of such work in the understanding of the culture of Chavín, the identification of all species of creatures in the highly stylized art of Chavín should assume new importance. The following study is an attempt to clarify the identification of one minor figure of Chavín art, the butterfly.<sup>1</sup>

Butterflies are not a common subject in ancient Peruvian art. Unlike felines, birds, quadrupeds such as deer and llamas, and various sea creatures; insects, including butterflies, are found only very occasionally. Representations of butterflies are almost completely restricted to the northern Peruvian cultures where a few examples are found in the Moche or Moche-related metal ornaments of Loma Negra (Piura). Here they cannot be closely dated because the material from Loma Negra and related sites was looted and all archaeological associations lost. Several other butterfly representations are to be found in Moche metalwork, but not in other media where insect representations are seemingly restricted to dragonflies and a few species of crawling creatures.<sup>2</sup> Aside from these few appearances in the Moche styles, the butterfly is almost completely unknown in ancient Peruvian art.<sup>3</sup> Thus it can be assumed that butterflies were not particularly prominent in the religious systems for which art is the surviving source of information.

However, at Chavín in Ancash several butterfly representations occur and in contexts which suggest that the butterfly had some

supernatural significance to the inhabitants of the site. There are three known representations of butterflies or winged insects; all come from the main ceremonial precincts. Two can be assigned to phase AB on stylistic grounds. The third, which may not be a butterfly at all, is associated with the first enlargement of the Old Temple and probably belongs to phase C (cf. Lumbreras, 1977, p. 35).

The first of the butterflies (fig. 1) has been known for a long time and has been published several times (e.g., Lumbreras, 1970, p. 92; 1974, fig. 63; Rowe, 1962, fig. 13). Carved on a roughly square slab measuring 54 by 50 cm., it is of the same general form and style as the better known slabs illustrating the Smiling God holding shells and the warrior-monkey (Lumbreras, 1970, pp. 92-93). According to Lumbreras (1970, pp. 93-94), all of these slabs were found in the so-called Atrio de las Lapidas, fallen and in disorder. They seem originally to have been part of a frieze on the upper wall of a vestibule, antechamber or patio in front of the Black and White Portal.

The figure on this slab has previously been identified as a bat, an identification originally made by Marino Gonzales Moreno.<sup>4</sup> Bats are common at the site of Chavín where the galleries form convenient roosting places. Also common at the site are bushes which bear a small round fruit on which these bats feed, and which Gonzales identified (to Rowe) as being the round objects held in the clawed feet of the figure.

In order to consider the relative probability of the identification of this figure as a bat or a butterfly, we must first discuss the characteristics of these creatures, and then compare these characteristics to those represented on the stone carvings.

Bats, although mammals, have evolved a very special type of wing, an outgrowth of the arm and hand, to enable them to fly. In all bats this wing consists of a membrane connecting the tail and the legs above the ankle to the elongated fourth, fifth, and third fingers. The way in which the membrane is attached to the bony structures gives the bat wing its characteristic scalloped appearance. The thumb remains free on the upper center wing and is used by many species as an aid in dispatching and eating prey. Wing patterning in bats takes only the form of prominent veination of the thin membrane, and even such veination is not particularly common. There are no bats with spotted wings, although there are several species of tropical and subtropical bats with spotted bodies (e.g., Eudermis spp.). A bat's body is definitely mammalian in form, and although small, is large in comparison to that of a flying insect. Most bats, including the majority of tropical species, have inconspicuous legs and feet attached to the tail membrane at the ankle (for tail membranes see Allen, 1939, figs. 24-25 and pp. 120-130). There is, however, a common lowland tropical bat, the bulldog bat (Noctilio spp.), which has long, highly developed legs and claws. This bat is a fisher and the development of the hind limbs is a specialization enabling it to gaff fish swimming near the surface. The head of any bat has as its single most obvious feature a pair of large ears. Since bats depend on sound and not sight for guidance, their eyes are small and inconspicuous. Most bats have rather pronounced fangs and sharp teeth.

Butterflies generally have four broad wings, a relatively slender elongated body (proportionately broader in moths), six legs and two antennae. The mouth is a proboscis which can be coiled. There is a tendency for the wings to be decorated, frequently with circular patterns, and many common butterflies have a swallowtail in which the lower set of wings extends in taillike points. The eyes are large and prominent.

If we compare these descriptions to fig. 1, we see that the figure, though winged, clawed, and having a fanged mouth, does not really have many bat characteristics. The wings, rather than being scalloped, are divided into three separate or semiseparate appendages with a double tail, decorated like the wings, hanging between the legs. This tail, while totally unlike the tail membrane of any known bat, is curiously reminiscent of the butterfly swallowtail. Equally, the spots on the wings, even though these are conventional patterns in Chavín art, relate to butterfly markings and not to any known bat. The large clawed feet of the figure might be considered to represent the bulldog bat mentioned above. Given the known interest of the Chavín people in water creatures, especially those of the tropical lowlands, an unusual bat that fished could well have been considered a suitable species for incorporation into a pantheon which included night and water creatures (cf. Lathrap, 1977). The bulldog bat is confined to the tropical lowlands, and the rather stylized form of the figure could be explained as being due to the unfamiliarity of the artist with the creature, an argument advanced for the rather unusual form of Chavín cayman representations (Rowe, 1962, p. 19; Lathrap, 1971). Likewise the argument can be advanced that the fanged mouth is batlike and that the curlicues on the wings and head correspond respectively to the thumb and to a nose leaf, a nasal form common in many New World bats. On the other hand, the curlicues are more likely to represent butterfly antennae and/or proboscis, while the prominent eye is more similar to that of a butterfly than a bat.

The question of the fanged mouth is altogether another matter. Such mouths are customarily used in Chavín representations in order to distinguish ordinary from non-ordinary (supernatural?) creatures. The probable original position of this slab suggests that it represents some sort of supernatural being, so the fanged mouth must be considered as a signifier, and not as any endeavor at representationalism.

A final note should be made to dispel the possibility of identification of the representation as a bird. In the first place it is evident that the decorations on the wings are not meant to indicate feathers since feathers have a specific set of decorations as seen in the eagle figures that are essentially contemporary (Rowe, 1967, figs. 11-13). Secondly, there is no beak represented as there is on all bird and angel representations in Chavín art.

The balance of the evidence from the Atrio de las Lápidas figure, then, does not support either a bat or a bird identification. Even though the proposed identification as a butterfly does not rest on overwhelming evidence, I would argue that it is the most likely alternative given both the internal features of the figure and its archaeological associations. The other figures found in the Atrio suggest an association with the Smiling God and are day creatures: falcons and monkeys.

Were night associations more important one might expect to see owls (which do appear in Chavín-related art), owl monkeys (*Aotus* spp.) and, following this, bats instead of butterflies.<sup>5</sup> Although such associations are mere conjecture, the evidence of the figure itself; the wing and tail form, the wing decorations, the inconspicuous body, the prominent eye and the curlicue/antennae, tend to support an insect identification.

The second of the butterfly representations is much clearer than the first, probably because, although fragmentary, it is somewhat more realistic in terms of Western artistic conventions. It should also be noted that those portions of the anatomy most frequently the focus of Chavín stylization (especially the legs and the fore part of the face) are missing from this specimen. This figure (Lumbreras, 1977, fig. 53), or rather series of figures, decorated a cornice in the same manner as the previously known falcon and jaguar cornices. Only one of the figures is well preserved, although there are indications of a similar figure next to it. Only the upper wings and a portion of the head are preserved in detail. These show stylizations similar to those of the previously described butterfly. In this case the upper wings are bifurcated in a manner which is undeniably lepidopterid. The wings are covered with decorations in the form of circles, crosses, L- and S-shaped elements and small crossed lines. The body, not clearly distinguished from the wings, seems to have borne four-petaled "flower" motifs. The arrangement of these conventional patterns is somewhat different than that seen on the Atrio butterfly and can be seen to approximate roughly the wing patterns of many species of butterflies. Fig. 2 shows a member of the genus *Danais*, common in coastal (and perhaps highland) Peru, as an example of this very common design layout. In these butterflies the inner portion of the wings is covered with a series of long cellular markings. The upper and outer parts of the wings are usually spotted. The S-shaped markings (with their inner divisions) can perhaps be seen as conventionalized versions of these cellular markings with the circles, crosses, etc., replicating the spotted designs of the upper and outer wings. As Lumbreras has remarked (1977, p. 27), the butterfly markings are the same as those used to represent pelage markings on feline representations in the Sunken Circular Plaza. This device may have occurred to the artist on the basis of an analogy between the coloring of the butterfly and that of jaguars, as many butterflies are yellow to orange with black (and white) markings.

Although the head of the cornice butterfly is badly damaged, it again bears little resemblance to that of a real butterfly (or bat). The lower portion of a fanged mouth remains and suggests, as with the Atrio butterfly, a relatively square "animal" face. The large round eye is well within the range of variation of phase AB eye shapes (Roe, 1974, p. 72). The two small curlicues on top of the head suggest attenuated antennae (or exaggerated body "hairs" such as are found on some butterflies) arranged into a headdress of vertical elements. Such headdresses are seen on many other Chavín natural and supernatural representations, both human and animal (e.g., Rowe, 1962, fig. 29). A further S-shaped element issues from the head and is probably one antenna; the rest of the head is too damaged to see any detail.

Unfortunately the lower part of the body is also missing. However, the general layout of the figure and the size of the cornice slab suggest that the lower part of this butterfly was similar to that of the Atrio butterfly with two splayed legs on either side of a tail.

The final known appearance of an insect motif at Chavín de Huántar <sup>6</sup> comes from the Celda de las Vigas Ornamentales, an antechamber to the Galería de las Columnas, one of the largest of the subterranean galleries of the Great Pyramid. In this antechamber a series of incised and painted figures decorated the ceiling. These figures, although undeniably Chavín in style, are different in both execution and elaboration from the low relief carvings of the exterior of the temple. On the west ceiling slab is a series of four nearly identical figures within a rectangular design area (Lumbreras, 1970, p. 116; Lumbreras and Amat Olazábal, 1969, lám. XIa). Although provisionally identified by Lumbreras as crustaceans (1970, pp. 116-117), the figures appear to be more like insects. Each figure is roughly rectangular with a small central body ending in a large circular head with prominent antennae. The wings are divided into five to seven parts, the top and bottom segments of slightly different form, with each of the central segments decorated with a single U-shaped element with the open end of the U toward the body. The lower body ends in a swallowtail each half of which terminates in a narrow protuberance as well as being decorated with a rough U-shaped incision.

Although these figures are very different from those of the Atrio slab and the cornice, they should probably be classed as insects and not as crustaceans. No feet are shown, nor is the single flat tail, common on both fresh and salt water shrimps and spiny lobsters, depicted. The form is different enough from the two figures described previously that these figures may well represent some other type of flying insect such as a dragonfly, although the differences may be due simply to style change. These figures are mentioned only as further evidence that insects were not ignored in the artistic and symbolic universe of Chavín.

The identification of the figures from the Atrio slab and the cornice as butterflies seems to be on a relatively firm basis. The deviations from what we would consider realistic rendering can be explained as artifacts of a developed system of symbolic representation and, perhaps, as relics of a folk taxonomy held by the Chavín people. The first subject has been exhaustively dealt with elsewhere (Rowe, 1962), the second is one which has previously been only fleetingly considered.

When one looks at the two butterflies in question one sees a standard variation from "normal" or fully representational depictions of a butterfly. Aside from the kennings, these variations include a frontal depiction of wings and body combined with an impossible profile squarish head with a large eye and fanged mouth, multiple upper wings, and large legs with clawed feet flanking a double tail. When we turn to Chavín carvings of similar style we notice immediate analogs in the depiction of birds. Here one sees a nearly identical head, this time with a beak added to the top, the wing feathers shown as a reduced series of elements, and legs separated by a central tail. A curlicue element on the

top of the wings (shown as a shorter feather on the cornice eagles) has its analog in the wing top curlicues of the Atrio butterfly and the larger curlicues of the cornice butterfly. These analogs between bird and insect representations can be dealt with on two levels: the relationship of design layout to function (and to technology) and local folk taxonomy. These two levels appear to be completely interrelated, as indeed one would expect them to be.

All peoples have models which enable them to group somewhat unlike items (both natural and supernatural) in the world into sets. It is these sets, more than individual members of the sets, which are used in thought and action. Contemporary Western society officially uses the Linnean system of classification as a device for dividing the living world into manageable groups. This was not always the case as even a cursory look at pre-18th century European art will show. For example, until Linnaeus (and well after in many cases) dolphins were classified as fish; special fish perhaps, but fish. Although dolphins are mammals (in our current classificatory system) and have smooth skins, they are often shown with scales in artistic representations from past centuries. Similar types of folk taxonomies have been remarked upon for American peoples, notably by Lévi-Strauss (1973) for the Bororo and most recently by Helms (1977) for various tropical peoples.

One can see in the relief carvings of Chavín reflections of a similar taxonomy in which creatures we would consider unlike are grouped. In this case butterflies and birds are, artistically at least, subsumed into a category which might be called "flying things." <sup>7</sup> As such they are placed in the same contexts and represented in much the same manner, regardless of specific details of the anatomy of the living creature. Flying creatures are, hence, shown in similar poses with a similar arrangement of limbs and wings and so on. To distinguish between members of this class (which may be important in some contexts) anatomical detail pertinent to a specific identification is included. This includes beaks on birds, antennae on butterflies, and a certain attention to body proportions. It also seems to include a different set of patterns for feathered and non-feathered wings, neither particularly realistic, but arranged in a manner which recalls the actual placement of feathers or wing patterns on birds and butterflies. However, because both are members of the same set a certain amount of liberty is taken in artistic depiction, so the wings of the butterfly are more serrated than the birds' and a part of the wing is placed as a tail between the (fictional) legs.

In addition to such a classification, the relationship between birds and butterflies was apparently re-enforced by the technology of Chavín stone relief carving. As Roe has demonstrated (1974, pp. 7-8), Chavín art was rigidly conceptualized and rigidly executed. He hypothesizes that one formal cause of this rigidity was the use of templates (stencils) for executing the various figures and that there were stencils for various body parts (and kennings) in a set number of sizes which were used to form the whole figure. In this case one might expect the Chavín artist to use many of the same stencils in depicting birds and butterflies and indeed, there is enough similarity to indicate that this might have been the case. Since, in Chavín art, figures must fill the space assigned to them, we can tell that the butterflies were not intended to

have beaks because there is no space within the rectangular frame for a beak. Variations in depiction probably refer to differences in species; in butterflies these variations seem to be in wing form and decoration, in birds beak and cere form and face markings.

Although butterflies and birds seem to fit into a single representational and, perhaps taxonomic, class, it is not known where the flying insects of the Celda de las Vigas Ornamentales fit in. They do fulfill one of the canons of Chavín art in that four of them are placed to fill a rectangular space (or each one fills a rectangle of its own). But they have no kennings and, in fact, very little detail. The fish shown on the east roof slab (Lumbreras, 1970, p. 115; Lumbreras and Amat Olazábal, 1969, lám. XIb) is more clearly within the canons of Chavín supernatural representation so that one is left with no easy interpretation of the Vigas flying insects. Temporal (the insects are probably considerably later than the butterflies) or functional factors may provide part of the answer and it is interesting that the Vigas insects do have multiple wings and swallowtails.

The proposed existence of a group of flying things within the taxonomic system of Chavín does not presuppose any specific beliefs attached to this class. That is another matter entirely and one which can be approached only through meticulous comparative iconographic, archaeological and ethnohistoric study. The most plausible inference that can be drawn from the co-occurrence of birds and butterflies with the Great Image in phase AB of Chavín, is that these flying creatures were related to the cult of the Smiling God. The position of butterflies within this cult may well be clarified by further study of the cult itself as well as its origin and distribution. Current information provides one possible suggestion regarding the distribution of the butterfly motif; that is that the cult of the Smiling God was largely local. Some other figures, originally associated with the Smiling God were later associated with other, more widely travelled deities. It may be that there was something in the significance of the butterfly that did not permit easy transference to other belief systems, so the butterfly never passed into the group of mythical animals that were common in the art of ancient Peru.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Most of the arguments advanced for a butterfly identification of these figures also apply to a moth identification which is equally likely. The term butterfly may be assumed here to include moths, the use of the two terms being avoided in the text mainly for reasons of style.

<sup>2</sup>The term insect is used here in its vernacular rather than its technical sense.

<sup>3</sup>I refer, of course, only to representational art styles. It should be noted that non-representational art styles were common in highland Peru following Chavín and that even had butterflies continued to be

important in the religious system, we would have no evidence of it.

<sup>4</sup>J.H. Rowe, personal communication.

<sup>5</sup>Of course, if one wishes to interpret these figures as moths, the argument shifts to whether bats or moths are more truly night creatures and is largely superfluous.

<sup>6</sup>There are what appear to be insect representations in the painted reliefs of Garagay, a Chavín-related site on the central coast (Ravines and Isbell, 1976, fig. 20).

<sup>7</sup>A similar argument might be advanced for the depiction of caymans with fish tails. This kind of set formation might have included assumptions of related behaviors as well, but one cannot really know.

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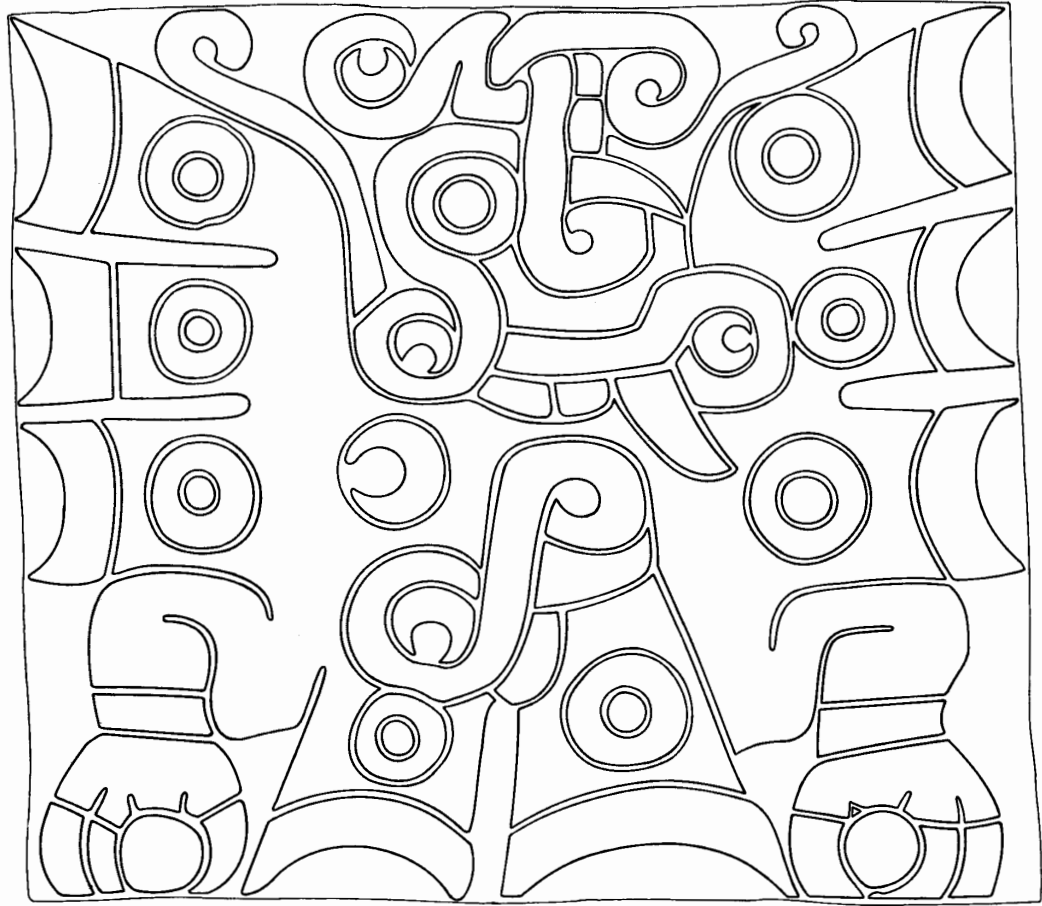
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## KEY TO ILLUSTRATIONS

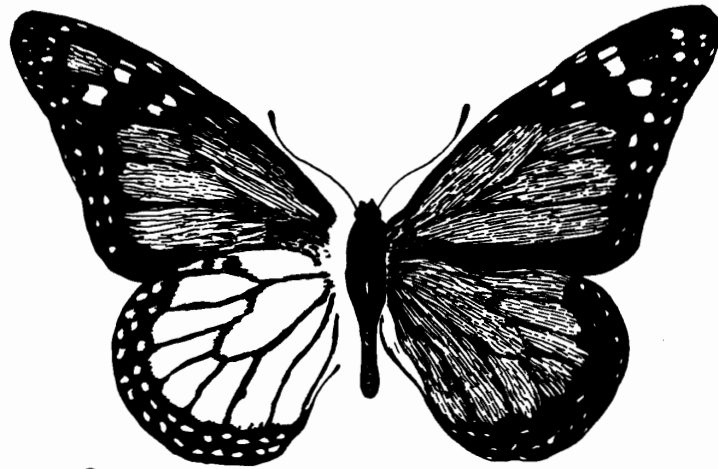
## Plate XXI

Fig. 1. Drawn from a rubbing by John H. Rowe. Ink version by Mark V. Hodges.

Fig. 2. Redrawn by the author from Ridoutt, 1939, p. 66. Colors are chestnut brown with black and white borders and spots. The body and right wing are seen from the underside, the left wing from above.



1



2

Plate XXI. Fig. 1, Chavín style butterfly; fig. 2, Danais archippus, a common butterfly of the central coast of Peru. See Key to Illustrations.