

DANCE IN MOCHE ART

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One of the most remarkable artistic traditions of pre-Columbian America was produced by the Moche kingdom, which flourished on the north coast of Peru between approximately 100 B.C. and A.D. 700. The Moche people left a vivid artistic record of their activities, among which are scenes of dancing. Although dance scenes are relatively rare within the total corpus of Moche art, taken together and analyzed within the context of related archaeological and ethnographic evidence, they provide valuable insights into the nature of ancient Andean dance.

There are two distinct categories of dance scenes in Moche art: those with normal human figures and those with what we shall call death figures. The latter are emaciated, with ribs showing and little or no flesh on their faces, thus giving them a skeletal appearance. We shall begin with an analysis of the scenes with normal human figures and later compare these with scenes involving death figures.

Dances with Normal Human Figures

Dance representations in Moche art were identified by Jorge Muelle in 1936 and by Arturo Jiménez Borja in 1938, and were further discussed by the latter in 1951. Their pioneering work was based primarily on four Moche fine-line drawings, which are illustrated here in figs. 1-4. Each of these drawings is reproduced from a ceramic vessel in the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología in Lima. Both authors noted that these scenes illustrate lines of individuals linked by holding hands, and that these lines appear to be moving to the accompaniment of musicians. Thus they interpreted them as representations of dance.

In the process of compiling a photographic archive of Moche art from museums and private collections throughout the world, we have located eight additional representations of similar dance scenes (figs. 5-12). They allow us to confirm the observations made by Muelle and Jiménez Borja, and to expand substantially on their original work.

Two of the additional dance scenes (figs. 5,6) are similar to those originally identified by Muelle and Jiménez Borja. They portray lines of individuals linked by holding hands. The style of painting in fig. 5 is so similar to that in fig. 4 as to suggest that the two were painted by the same artist.¹ Fig. 6 is unusual in having the figures arranged on various planes which divide the design field into angular sections.

The scene illustrated in figs. 7a and 7b is unique, and is of key importance in recognizing new elements of Moche dance. As in figs. 1-6, it portrays sets of individuals who are linked by holding hands. However, it also shows one set of individuals who are linked by holding a long ribbon, demonstrating that hand holding and ribbon holding were alternative ways for Moche dancers to form the sets of linked individuals that characterize Moche dance.²

Once we understand that individuals linked by holding a long ribbon

are dancers, the drawings shown in figs. 8-12 can be recognized as Moche dance scenes. In each of these scenes a long ribbon serves to link sets of dancers.³

The ribbon appears to be made of a soft, light-colored material, which is of even width along its length. It lacks the Moche artistic canons used to indicate either netting or rope and is consistently shown undecorated. It was probably a woven textile, and appears to be a single length rather than one spliced from many short pieces. Some ribbons were quite long; the one shown in fig. 11 may have measured more than 15 meters.

When the ribbon is in use, each dancer grasps it with both hands. Sometimes the ribbon passes behind the dancers (fig. 10), but more often it is held in front (figs. 7-9, 12). In one instance (fig. 11) some of the dancers hold the ribbon in front, while others hold it behind. Three representations (figs. 7-9) show the dancers holding a loop of the ribbon in each hand.

Dancers linked by holding hands would have been limited in their movement, particularly movement of the upper body. Moreover, the dancers would have been relatively close to one another, and there would have been little variation in the distance between them. In contrast, the dancers linked by holding a ribbon would have had much more freedom of movement, and the spacing between adjacent dancers would have been more flexible. It is possible that the loops held by the dancers in figs. 7-9 were only maintained during part of the dance, and were released at other times in order to provide more distance between the dancers.

None of the dance representations indicates that individuals ever passed between linked dancers. Instead, it appears that the lines of linked dancers remained unbroken.

In most of the dance scenes, there is a clear dichotomy between major and minor dancers. Major dancers are more elaborately dressed and are usually larger than minor ones. Most scenes have one or two major dancers, each of whom is connected to a chain of minor dancers. In some instances (figs. 1,6,7) the major dancer faces the minor dancers, who appear to be moving toward him. Alternatively, the major dancer is at or near the head of the line, and is leading the minor dancers who follow after him (figs. 4,12).

One of the most remarkable aspects of the dance scenes is the great diversity of dress and ornament worn by the participants. Although some of the scenes have two or more figures wearing similar attire, there seems to be no standard clothing, headdress, or ornament for either the major or minor dancers, or for the musicians who accompany them. Moreover, some dance scenes, such as fig. 6, juxtapose figures wearing such a wide range of clothing, headdress, and ornament that it seems the artists were consciously attempting to underscore the diversity of the participants.

Nearly all of the clothing, headdress and ornament worn in the dance scenes is similar to that worn in other activities depicted by Moche artists. There is, however, one item which is found exclusively in dance scenes: the leggings worn by many of the dancers. These appear to be fastened to the legs with multiple tie strings, the ends of which are shown along the backs of the legs.

Jorge Muelle (1936, p. 77) stated that the leggings are rattles.

Jiménez Borja explained that they were made from the triangular endocarp of the oleander (1951, pp. 50-51, 87, 102, 103). The endocarps are dried and perforated, and then sewn loosely to rectangular pieces of cloth which are tied around the lower legs of the dancers. He illustrates these rattles being worn by contemporary dancers in Cajamarca (Jiménez Borja, 1951, p. 102).

Although leggings have not been reported from archaeological excavations in Moche sites, endocarps of the oleander have been found in Moche refuse (Donnan, 1973, p. 122). Moreover, one modeled Moche jar illustrates an individual who appears to be wearing precisely this type of legging (fig. 13; Jiménez Borja, 1951, p. 87).

There are various ways in which Moche artists depicted leggings. They look most like rattles in figs. 1, 6 and 12. They are less diagnostic in figs. 2, 7 and 8. The leggings shown on the central figure in fig. 9 have a netlike appearance which is unique in the sample.

When leggings are shown, they are generally worn by most of the dancers in the scene. This implies that the movements of the dancers were synchronized, and these movements would have been accentuated by the cadence of the rattles sounding at each step.

Musicians appear in most of the dance scenes, but their number, placement and the instruments that they play vary considerably. The most common musical instrument is the *quena* or vertical flute (figs. 1,6,7,11,12). In most scenes where *quenas* are being played, two or more individuals are shown playing them. Drums also appear frequently (figs. 1,3,4,6,7), normally accompanied by *quenas*.

Two of the dance scenes (figs. 3,6) have large trapezoidal rattles which are held by a vertical handle. Small metal rattles with this shape have been reported (Donnan, 1978, p. 173), but none has been found which is as large as those depicted in these scenes. Jiménez Borja, however, suggests that rattles of this size did exist, and that they were pounded on the ground to create a rhythmic sound (1951, pp. 47, 91).

One of the dance scenes (fig. 4) shows paired panpipes which are tied together, indicating that they were made to be played at the same time. Finally, one of the dance scenes (fig. 11) includes individuals that appear to be holding double-strand rattles.

In addition to the musicians and dancers, various scenes include individuals engaged in other activities. Some individuals hold shallow bowls (figs. 6,12), goblets (figs. 4,5), jars (fig. 11), or what looks like a whip (fig. 7). In figs. 6, 9 and 12 there are individuals that look like dwarfs, and fig. 6 has a prisoner with a rope around his neck. Two scenes (figs. 3,11) include a dog.

Two of the dance scenes (figs. 9,10) have loose headdresses positioned adjacent to the dancers. Headdresses are shown in this way in combat scenes, where the headdress has been removed from one of the warriors (e.g., Larco Hoyle, 1946, fig. 20a). It is generally thought that this is an artistic canon used by Moche artists to indicate that the figure with headdress removed has been defeated. It should be noted, however, that in dance scenes, the adjacent figures are still wearing their headdresses.

It is interesting to consider the possible locations where the dances are taking place. None of the scenes has background elements which clearly identify it as a desert, mountain or aquatic setting. However, several (figs. 4,6,12) show buildings in the proximity of the dancers, and one (fig. 6) appears to show the dancers proceeding up a ramp. Presumably the dances took place at Moche settlements.

Dances with Death Figures

Death figures constitute an important group in Moche iconography. They are normally engaged in erotic activity, playing musical instruments or involved in dances, although these three activities are by no means mutually exclusive.

Six dance scenes involving death figures were published as a unit by Gerdt Kutscher (1954, figs. 31A-33B). In our present photographic archive of Moche art, there are thirteen additional examples of death figure dance scenes. Three of the thirteen are nearly identical to others in the sample; the remaining ten are illustrated here in figs. 14-23.

The many similarities between these death figure dance scenes and dance scenes involving normal human figures strongly suggest that the two are closely related. Yet the Moche artists apparently saw them as distinct activities. They never depicted death figures dancing with normal human figures. Moreover, the death figure dancers are never shown wearing the leggings that are so characteristic of the scenes with normal human figures. They are never linked together by holding a ribbon, but instead are consistently linked by holding hands or by holding the wrists of the adjacent dancer.⁴

Another major distinction is that women and children are present only in death figure dance scenes. They occur in more than half of these representations, and often more than one woman and child is portrayed. The women dance, but do not play musical instruments. When included in a linked set of dancers, they normally are at the end of the line. Alternatively, the women are shown holding on to the arm of a panpipe player or having their wrist held by a figure with a whip. Children are usually shown being carried on a woman's back in a cloth that is tied around her shoulders, or standing adjacent to a woman, holding on to her clothing.

Quenas, drums and panpipes are found in dance scenes with death figures, just as they are in dance scenes with normal human figures. However, there is a much greater frequency of panpipes in the death figure scenes. They are normally played by two figures who stand facing one another. Double-strand rattles, like those seen in fig. 11, are not found in any of the death figure dance scenes, nor are large trapezoidal rattles like those seen in figs. 3 and 6.

Ceramic containers are shown much more frequently in death figure dance scenes than they are in scenes with normal human figures. Moreover, the death figure scenes have vessel forms that are not present in the other category. These include flaring bowls and spout and handle bottles (fig. 21).

Some of the death figure dance scenes include one individual whose face is shown in frontal view instead of the normal profile (figs. 14,17,22,

23). Frontal views do not occur in any of the dance scenes with normal human figures. There is also a holding posture which is found only in death figure dance scenes: one dancer uses both hands to grasp the forearm of the adjacent dancer (e.g., fig. 14). Generally this is done by individuals who are at the end of a line of connected dancers.

Some of the death figure dance scenes (figs. 15,16,18) have what Kutscher (1954, p. 58) has identified as a "rattle staff." Arriaga, writing in the early seventeenth century about religious practices in Peru, provides information suggesting a different function for these poles: "They hang the stalks with many ears of corn from willow branches and dance with them a dance called *ayrihua*. Then when the dance is over they burn them and make a sacrifice to libiac [lightning] to insure a good harvest" (Arriaga, ch. 2; 1968, pp. 30-31). In a footnote to the English translation of Arriaga, Keating states that *ayrihua* dances were performed after gathering the grain into granaries (Arriaga, 1968, p. 30). Perhaps the death figure dance scenes with the "rattle staffs" were related to harvest festivals.

There are three additional dance scenes which are unlike any of those discussed above. They are almost identical, and thus only two are illustrated here (figs. 22,23). The scene is unusually complex, and includes nine features that are not found in any of the other dance representations:

1. The erotic couple.
2. The figures with round objects in their hands.
3. The bat and the bird.
4. The llama with a figure riding it.
5. The figure positioned between the upper and lower levels.
6. The ring.
7. The kneeling deer (or llama?).
8. The two figures inside rectangular frames.
9. The combination of human figures and death figures in the same scene.

In addition, fig. 23 is unique in having three death figures modeled at the top of the bottle, between the spouts. Two are adults, who appear to be holding, and possibly feeding, an infant. It is difficult to interpret this scene. In contrast to all of the other representations of dance where the dancers and musicians are primary, here they are of secondary importance, relegated to a small area in the lower level of the scene. The major part of the scene consists of objects and activities not normally associated with dancing. This implies that dancing was related to these activities, but the nature of this relationship is not clear.

The normal human figures in the scene are the erotic couple and the figure positioned between the upper and lower levels. These three are considerably larger than any of the death figures, and are probably meant to be the foci of primary activities.

The figure positioned between the upper and lower levels is unique in our sample of Moche art. Erotic couples, on the other hand, are relatively common. The erotic activities depicted are almost certainly ritual practices which occurred in ceremonial contexts (Donnan, 1978, p. 177). The juxtaposition of the erotic activity and the dancers suggests that the two may have been components of a single ritual.

It is interesting to note that nearly all of the death figure dance

scenes were created in low relief. The only two exceptions, fig. 21 and one of the scenes published by Kutscher (1954, fig. 30A), are rendered in fineline drawing. In contrast, none of the dance scenes involving normal human figures was created in low relief; all are rendered in fineline drawing. This again suggests that the separation between these two categories of dance scenes was deliberate and important to the Moche artist.

It could be argued that the dichotomy between the two categories of dance scenes is simply a reflection of the dichotomy between the natural and supernatural worlds. The dance scenes involving normal human figures appear to illustrate an activity in which real people participate.⁵ But do the death figures belong exclusively to a supernatural realm? The iconographic evidence suggests that they do not, for there are many erotic scenes with death figures juxtaposed to and interacting with normal human figures (Benson, 1972, figs. 6-11, 6-20). Moreover, in figs. 22 and 23 there are normal human figures in close proximity to death figures. This indicates that death figure dancers could interact with the living.

Alan Sawyer (ms.) has suggested that many of the death figures are not truly dead, but rather are "living dead," a condition resulting from having their facial skin flayed. The emaciated condition of their bodies, according to Sawyer, "would subsequently result from severe weight loss due to the extreme difficulty of ingesting adequate nourishment" (ms., p. 4). Sawyer's argument is very plausible when one considers the way death figures are depicted. If he is correct, we are witnessing a group of mutilated individuals, including men, women and children, who participate in a dance which is rigidly separated from the dances of un mutilated individuals. The reason for the separation of these two groups may become apparent as our sample of Moche iconography increases in future years.

The Moche dance scenes discussed in this report are probably only a fraction of the full inventory of dances practiced by the Moche people. Moreover, our interpretation of these dance scenes is severely limited by our lack of understanding of the context which gave these dances their special meaning. Apparently, the dances were practiced as part of larger rituals. The best indication of this is the juxtaposition of dancing with other activities in figs. 22 and 23. It is also implied by various objects that were identified in other dance scenes. If the staffs in figs. 15, 16 and 18 do have corn tied to the upper ends, these dances may have been related to the harvest festivals discussed by Arriaga. Similarly, the extra headdresses in figs. 9 and 10 may indicate that these dances were related to combat. The figures holding bags in the upper part of fig. 3 are identical to those shown in some deer hunting ceremonies (Donnan, ms.), thus suggesting that this dance procession was part of the deer hunting ritual.

In most societies, dances are practiced as parts of larger rituals. Dancing allows for the overt expression of moods and values, such as celebration, sorrow, homage and unity, that underly these occasions and give them meaning. It is fortunate that the Moche artists included dance among the activities they chose to portray. Through their representations we are the privileged observers of dance as it was practiced in Andean South America more than a thousand years before European contact.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Donna McClelland for producing the illustrations that accompany this report, to Geraldine Clift and Donna McClelland for carefully editing several early versions of the text and to Alan Sawyer for allowing me to cite his unpublished manuscript. I am also very grateful to Patricia Lyon for her excellent editorial suggestions, and for pointing out several Moche dance representations that I was unaware of.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of multiple bottles painted by a single artist see Donnan, 1978, pp. 45-51.

² Jorge Muelle (1936, p. 76) identified an illustration in Baessler (1903, fig. 215), showing several men holding a rope, as a dance scene. The scene he was referring to is illustrated here in fig. 12.

³ Three other scenes with dancers linked by ropes have been brought to my attention by Patricia Lyon. One of these, a Moche III jar, is in the Uhle collection from Moche, at the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley (Grave 27, 4-3306). Another is a similar jar illustrated by Bennett (1939, fig. 8i). The third scene is on a mural from Pañamarca (Bonavia, 1974, figs. 25-28).

⁴ Wrist holding also was practiced by some normal human dancers (e.g., some of the dancers in fig. 1), but most of the depictions are not sufficiently detailed to discern the manner of linking.

⁵ With the exception of one individual in fig. 8, who appears to have fangs, and the two anthropomorphized deer playing drums in fig. 4, none of the participants in the normal human dance scenes is imbued with supernatural characteristics.

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KEY TO ILLUSTRATIONS

All drawings are by Donna McClelland, and are based on photographs by Christopher Donnan, except for fig. 2, which she drew from the source indicated below.

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Fig. 1. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima, 1/370. Specimen illustrated in Muelle, 1936, fig. 2; Jiménez Borja, 1951, pp. 84-85.

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Fig. 2. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima, Uhle collection, M/1702. After Jiménez Borja, 1951, p. 86.

Fig. 3. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima, 1/481. Specimen illustrated in Muelle, 1936, fig. 4d; Jiménez Borja, 1951, pp. 91-92, 118.

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Fig. 4. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima, 1/482. Specimen illustrated in Jimenez Borja, 1938.

Fig. 5. The British Museum.

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Fig. 6. Private collection.

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Fig. 7. Private collection.

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Fig. 8. Art Institute of Chicago, 55.1167.

Fig. 9. Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna.

Fig. 10. The British Museum.

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Fig. 11. Museo Casanelli, Trujillo, Peru.

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Fig. 12. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, VA 17644.

Fig. 13. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima.

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Fig. 14. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, VA 17883.

Fig. 15. Guillermo Ganoza collection, Trujillo, Peru.

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Fig. 16. Guillermo Ganoza collection, Trujillo, Peru.

Fig. 17. Museo de la Universidad Nacional de Trujillo, U3139.

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Fig. 18. Private collection.

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Fig. 19. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, VA 17880

Fig. 20. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York, 20/6484.

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Fig. 21. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, VA 17643.

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Fig. 22. Private collection.

Fig. 23. Museo Amano, Lima.

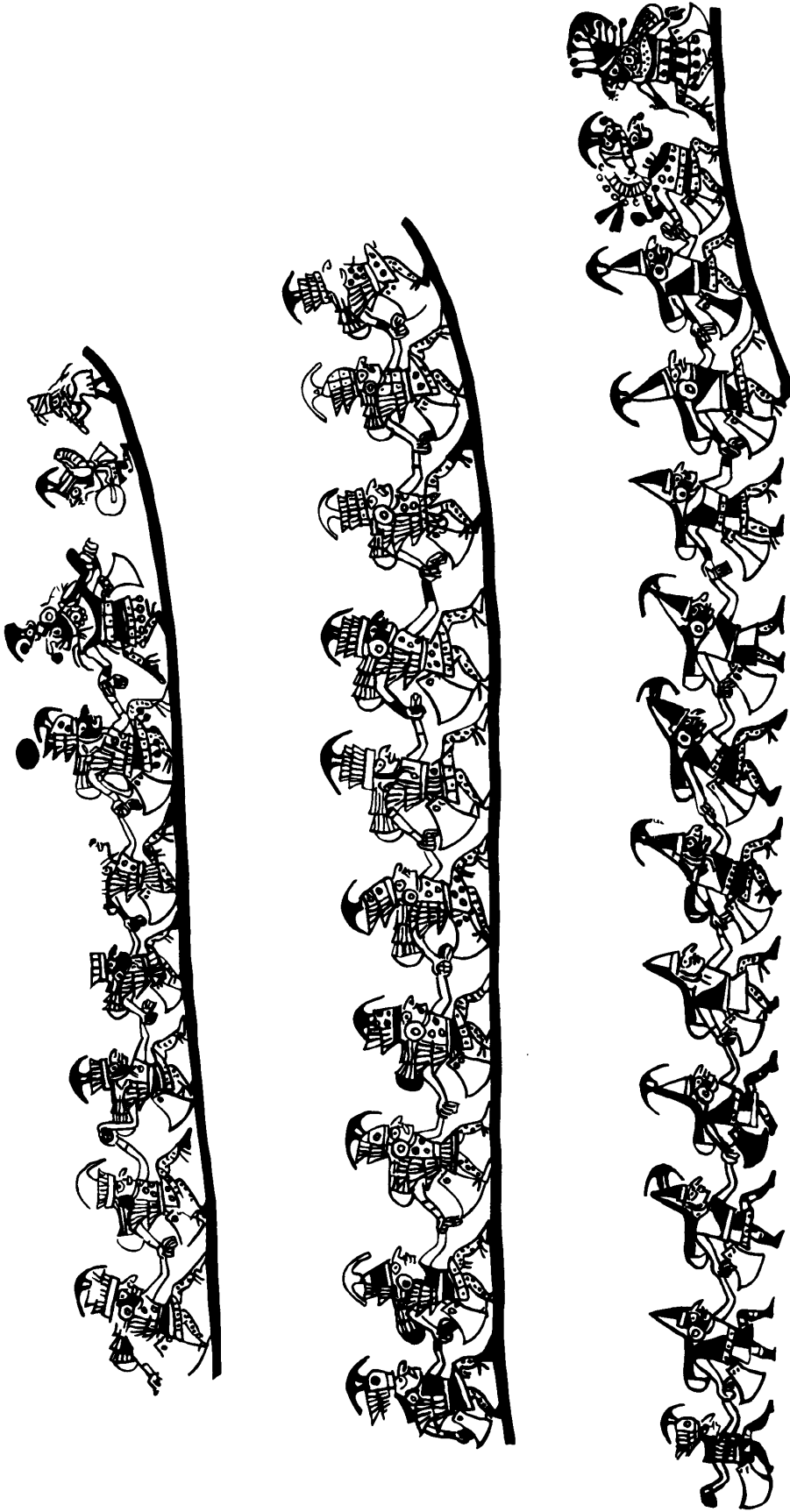


Fig. 1, Moche IV fineline drawing of figures spiraling upward, from chamber of stirrup spout bottle. See Key to Illustrations.

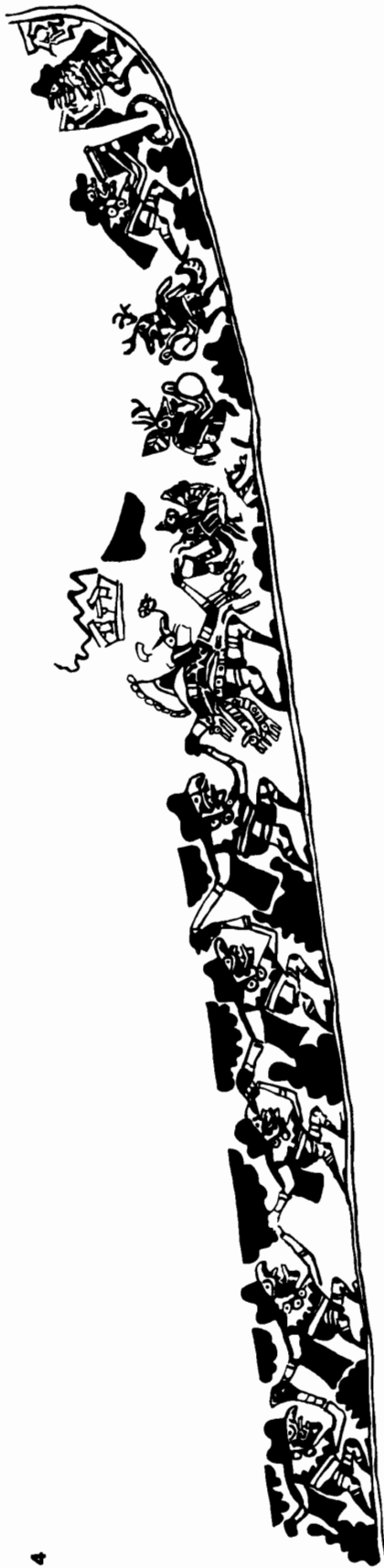
Moche IV fineline drawings: fig. 2, fragment from interior of flaring bowl rim; fig. 3, from chamber of stirrup spout bottle. See Key to Illustrations.



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Figs. 4, 5, Moche V fineline drawings of figures spiraling upward, from chambers of stirrup spout bottles. See Key to Illustrations.

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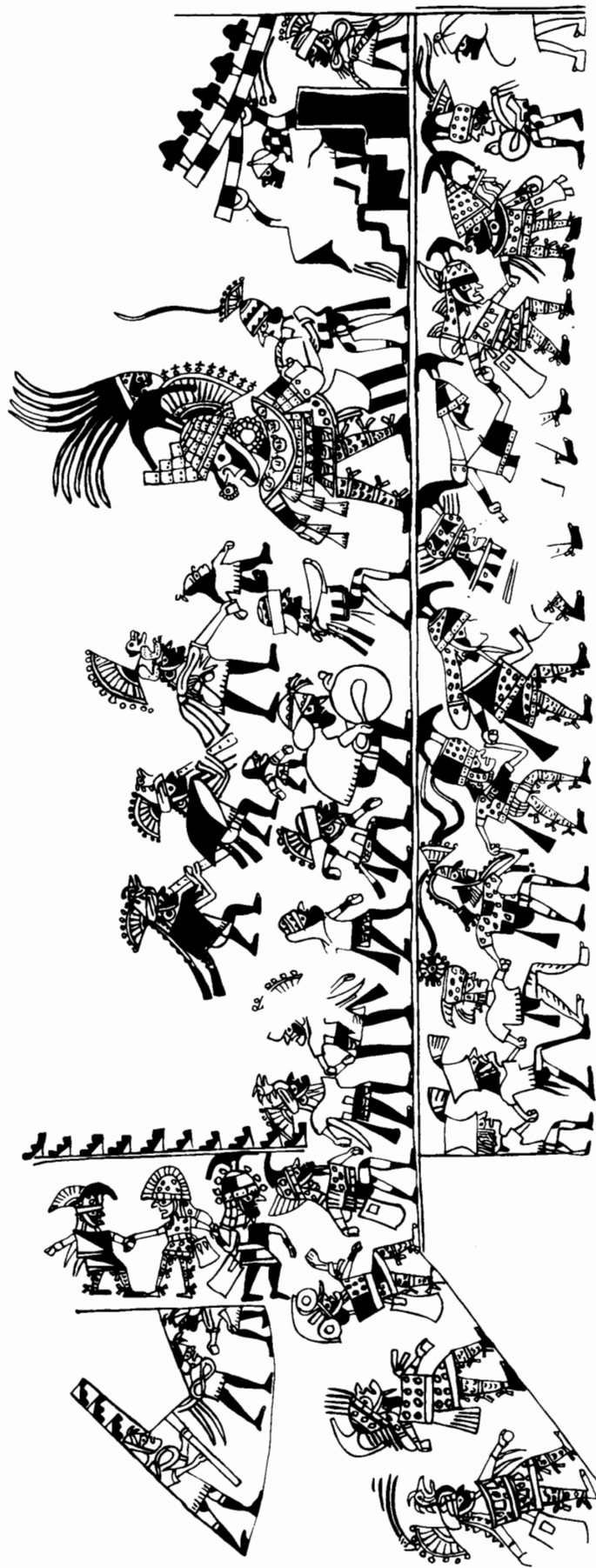
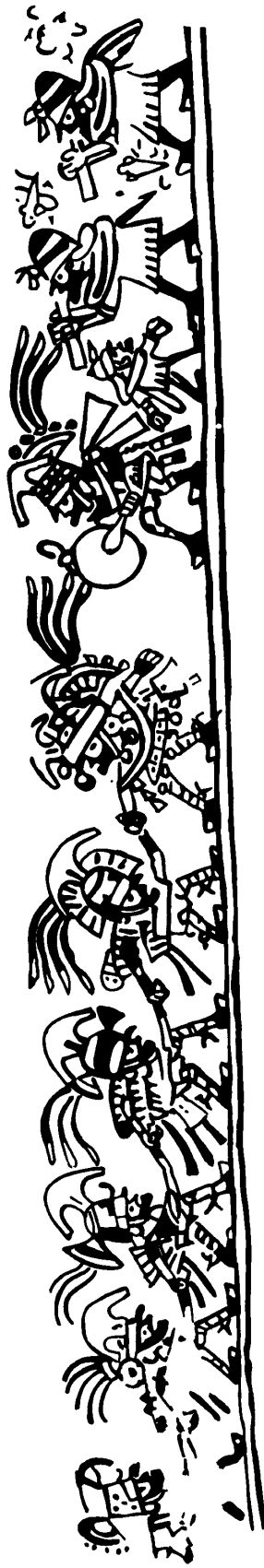
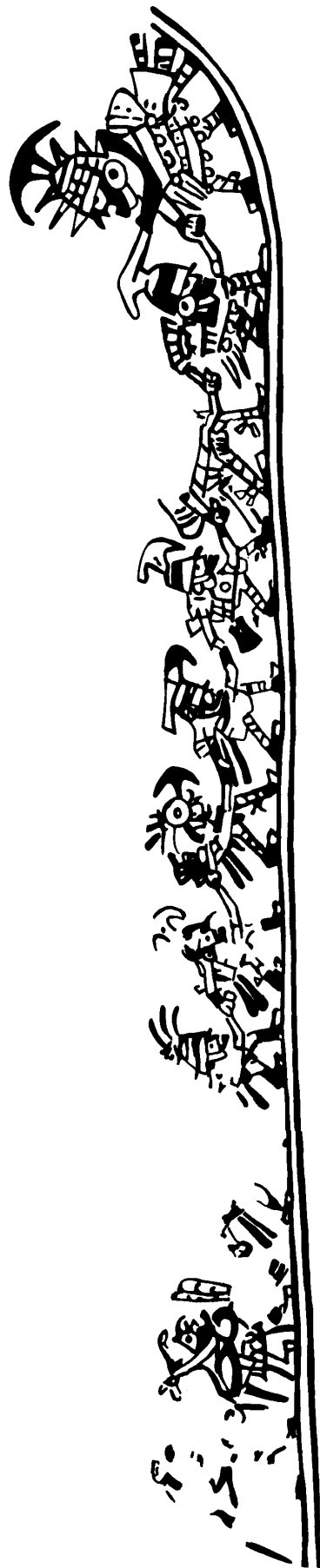
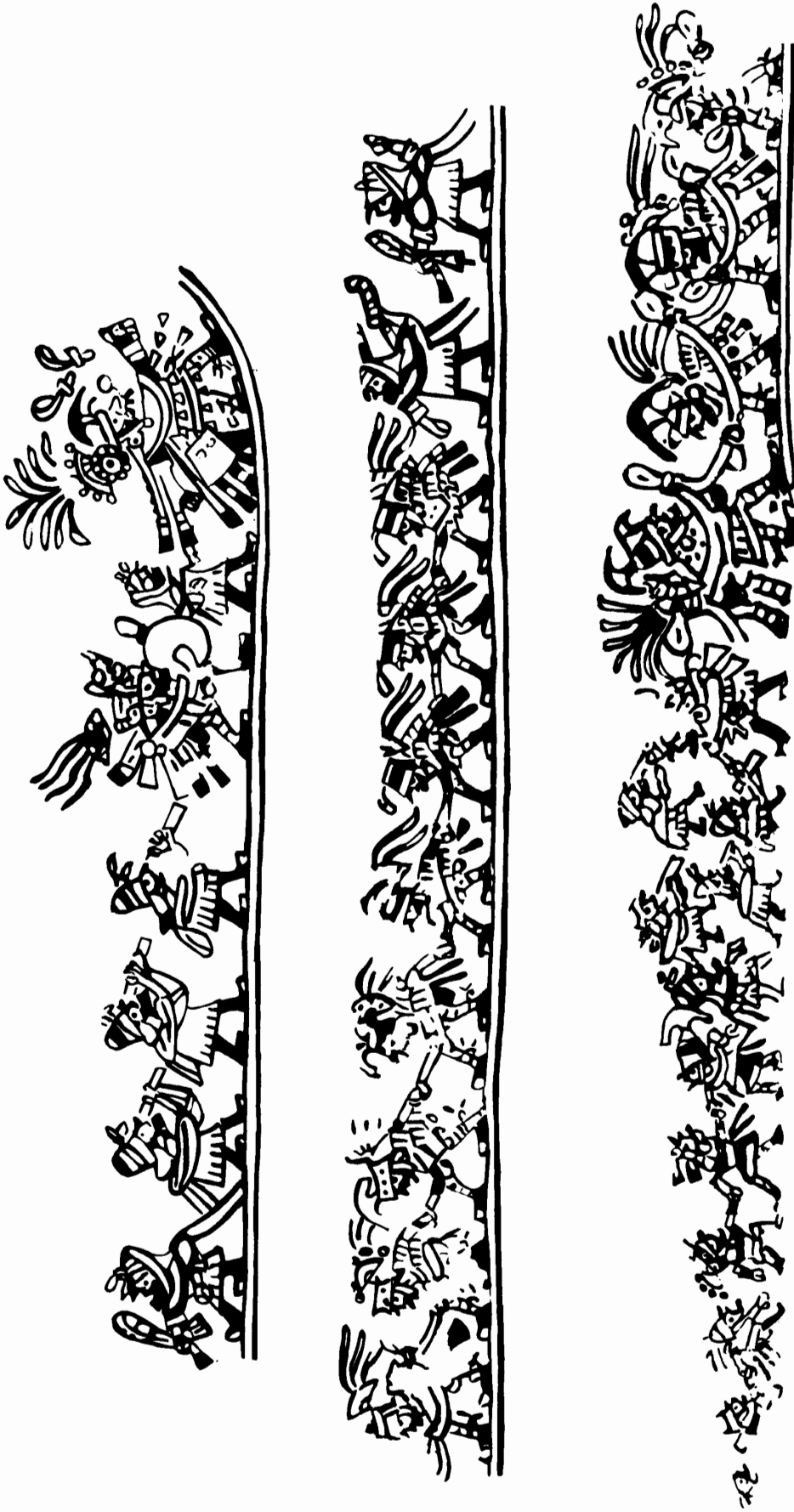


Fig. 6, Moche V fineline drawing, from chamber of stirrup spout bottle. See Key to Illustrations.





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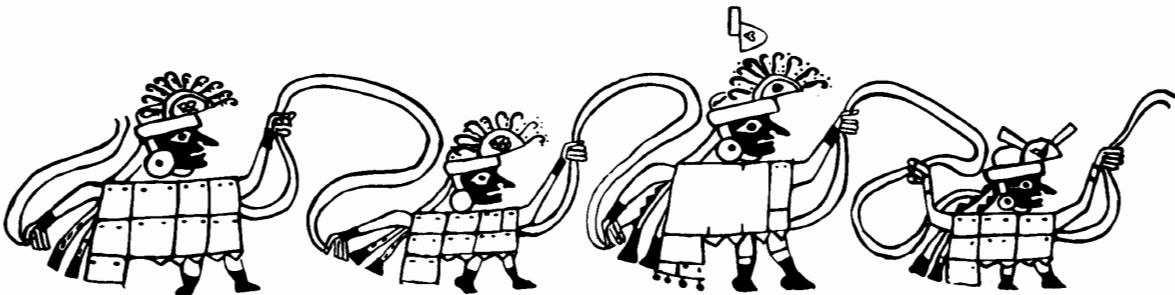
Fig. 7, Moche V fineline drawing of two rows of figures spiraling upward, from chamber of stirrup spout bottle. See Key to Illustrations. 111



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Figs. 8, 9, 10, Moche IV fineline drawings from chambers of stirrup spout bottles. See Key to Illustrations.

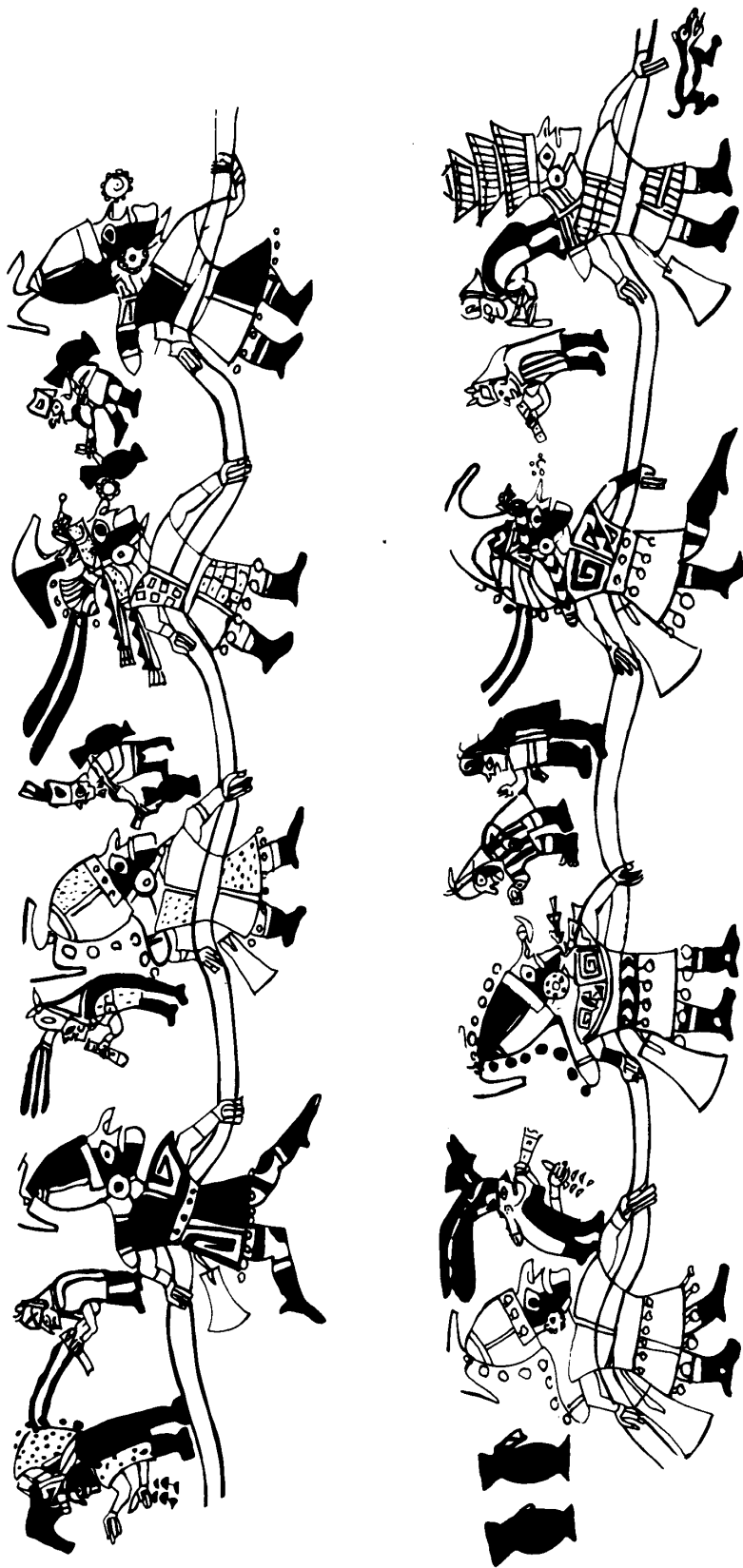


Fig. 11, Moche IV fineline drawing, from interior of flaring bowl rim. See Key to Illustrations.



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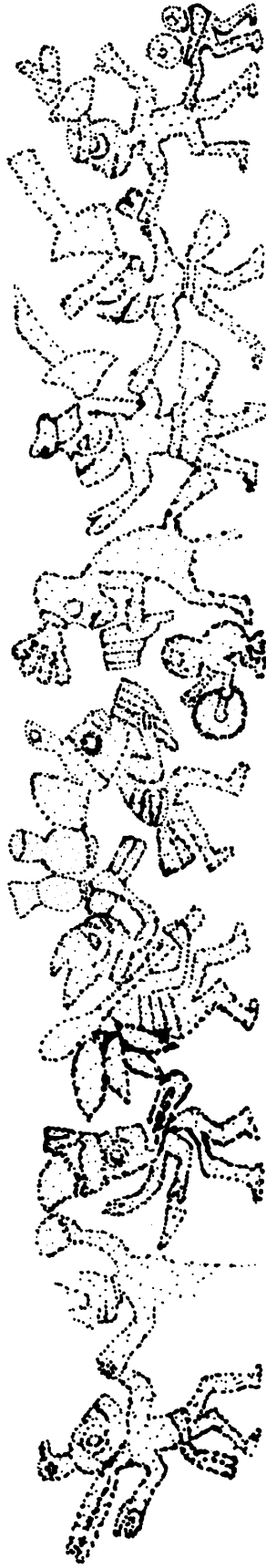


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Fig. 12, Moche IV fineline drawing from chamber of stirrup spout bottle; fig. 13, modeled Moche jar of individual wearing leggings. Photograph by Christopher Donnan. See Key to Illustrations.



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Moche IV low relief representations: fig. 14, from chamber of spout and handle bottle; fig. 15, from chamber of stirrup spout bottle. See Key to Illustrations.



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Figs. 16, 17, Moche IV low relief representations, from chambers of stirrup spout bottles. See Key to Illustrations.

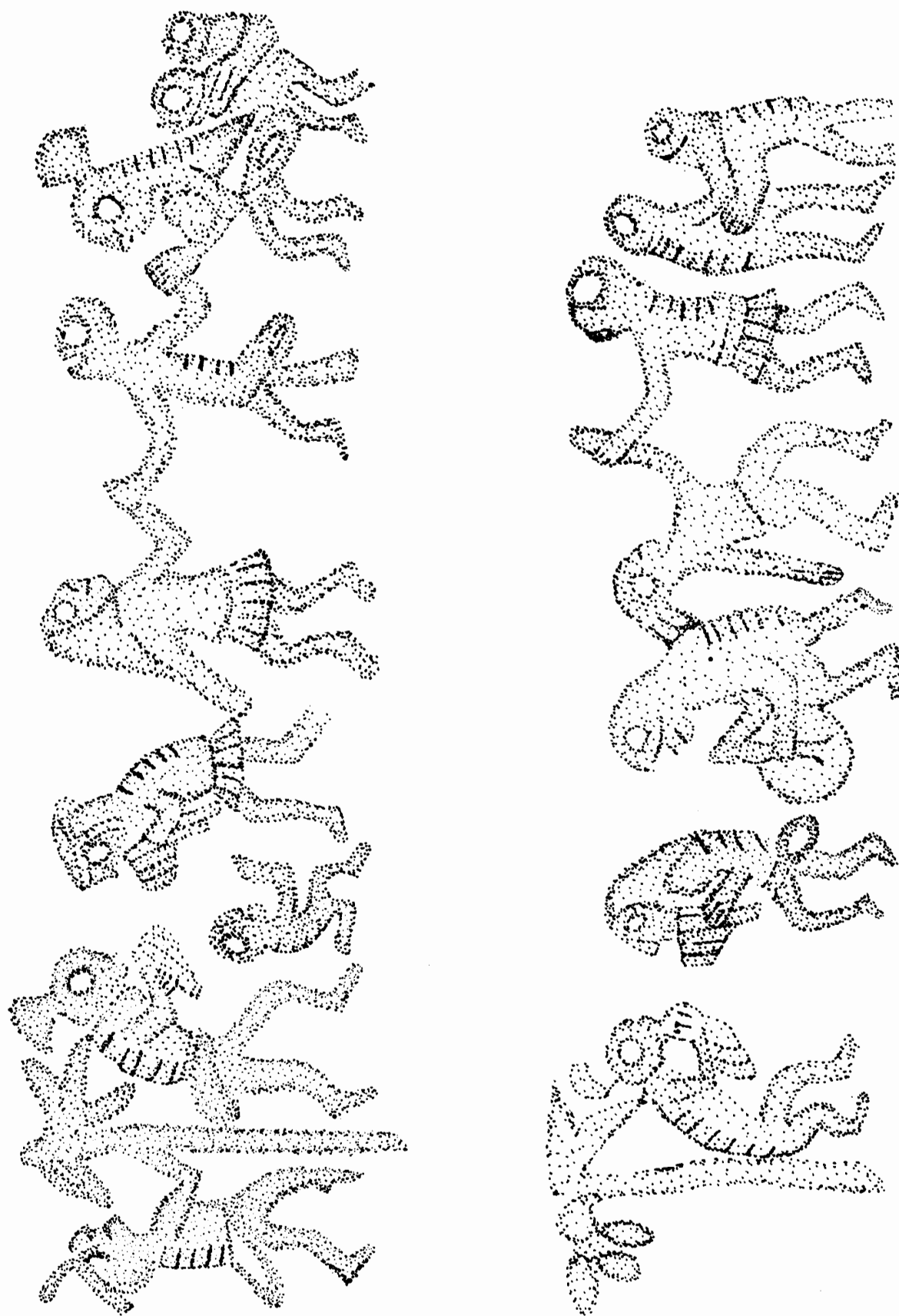
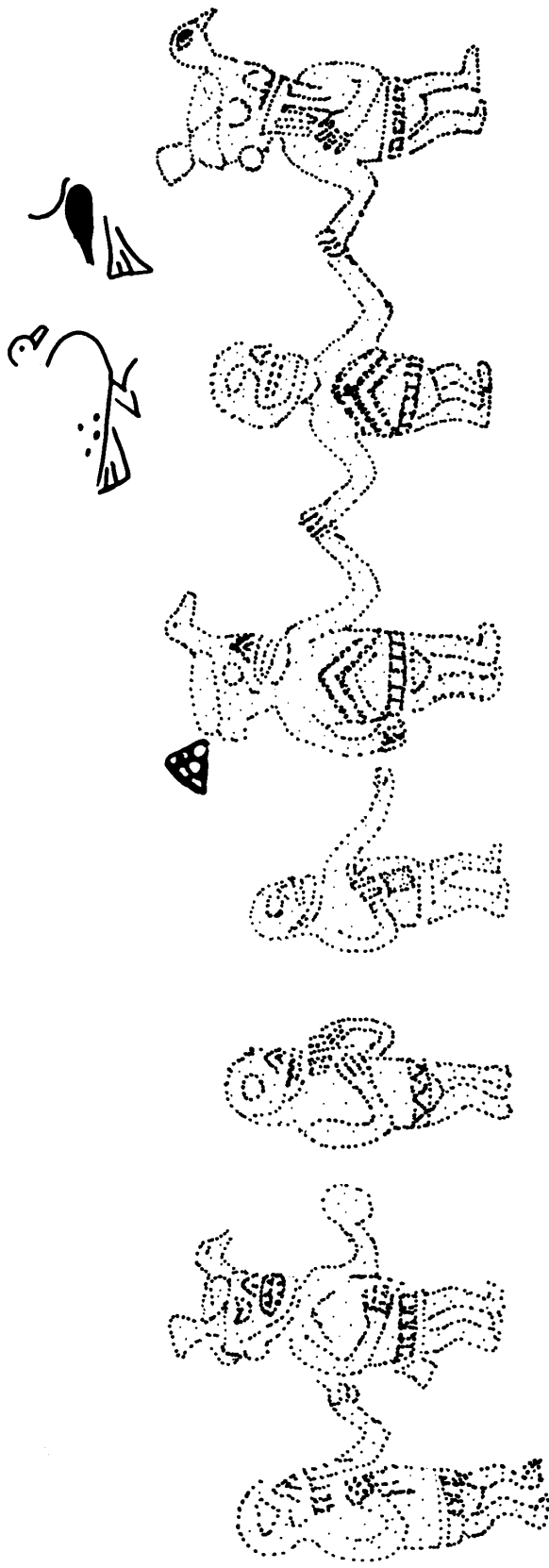


Fig. 18, Moche IV low relief representation from chamber of stirrup spout bottle. See Key to Illustrations.



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Moche IV low relief representations: fig. 19, from chamber of a jar; fig. 20, from chamber of a stirrup spout bottle. See Key to Illustrations.

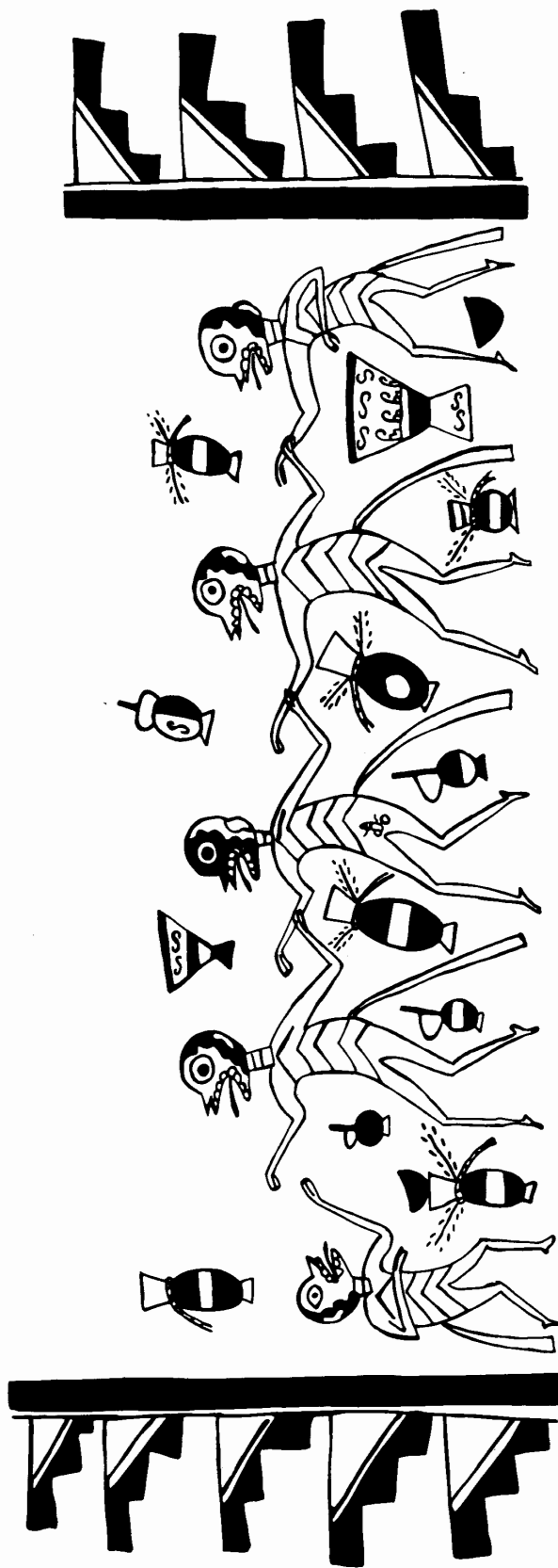
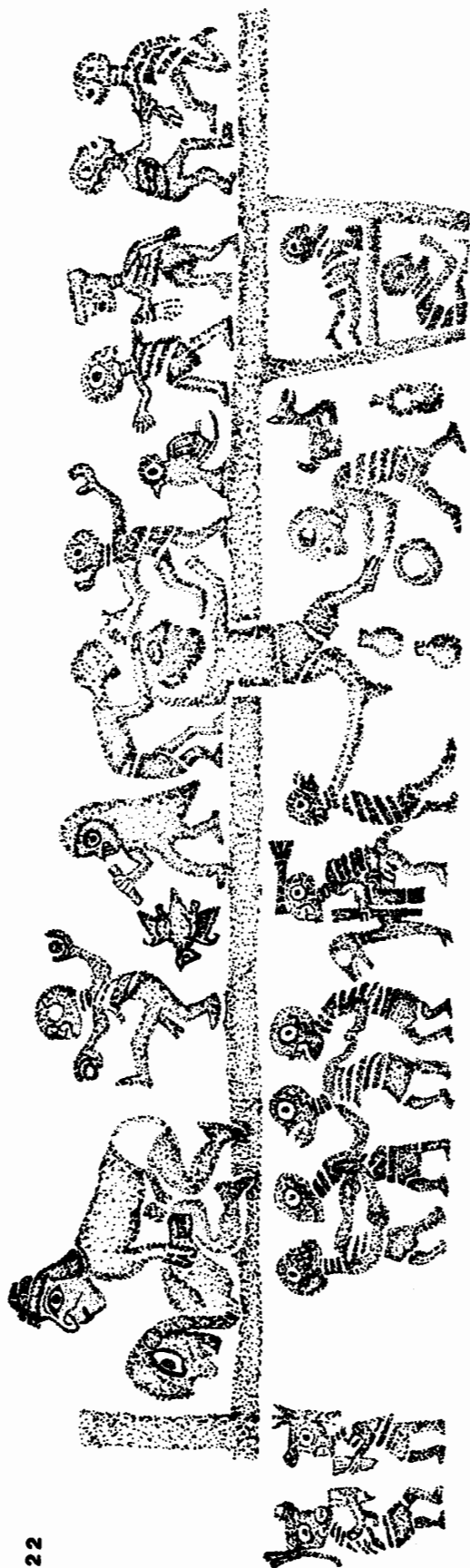
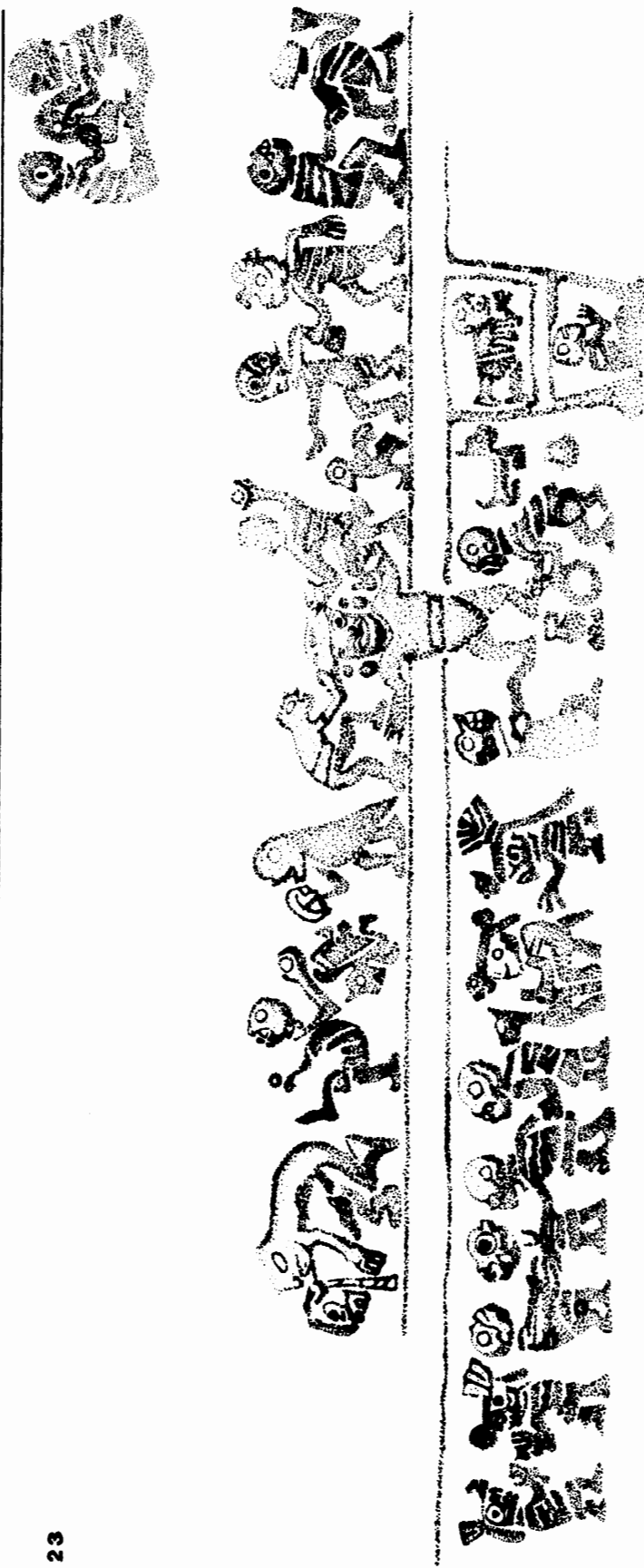


Fig. 21, Moche IV fineline drawing, from chamber of stirrup spout bottle. See Key to Illustrations.

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Figs. 22, 23, Moche III low relief representations, from chambers of stirrup spout bottles. See Key to Illustrations.