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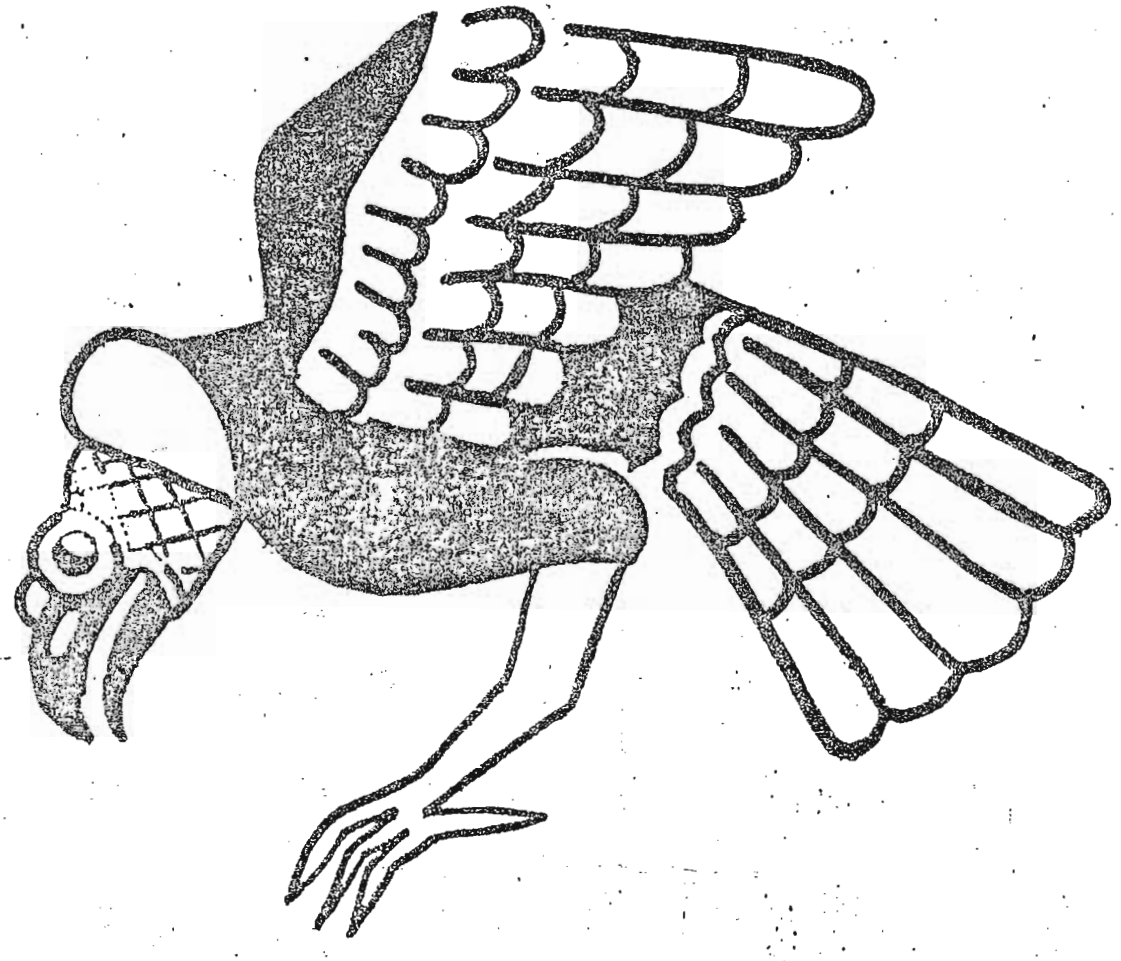

Metonymy over Metaphor:
Interpretation of Moche Humming Birds

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Introduction

The basic problem to be encountered in dealing with Moche iconography is well known: there are no verbal sources referring to the meaning of the images. If we make a treble distinction of description (of objects/occurances), identification (of conventional meaning), and interpretation (of cultural significance) - following Panofsky's 'pre-iconographical description,' 'iconographical analysis,' and 'iconological interpretation' (1955: 28ff) we can say that description is a comparatively easy task. If we recognize in an object a head-dress, we will not mistake its straps for legs (fig. 6). Identification, by contrast, is a problem difficult to deal with.

An Australian bushman, Panofsky said, "would be unable to recognize the subject of a Last Supper; to him, it would only convey the idea of an excited dinner party." In given situations, we are "all of us Australian bushmen. In such cases we, too, must try to familiarize ourselves with what the authors of those representations had read or otherwise knew." (1955:35f) This is, of course, what we cannot do in the case of Moche pottery: we do not know what they thought, we can only try to guess.

We guess by using external evidence, external to the Moche and also to ourselves. We must turn to verbal sources of other people, and we must adopt also a kind of thinking that differs from ours.

In the case of the Moche, the indirect systems of reference are supplied by the chronicles of the 16th and 17th centuries, by the travel journals of the 18th and 19th centuries, and by ethnographic studies produced in this century. These sources

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shed light on customs and beliefs of other Andean peasant societies which lived, or live, under conditions similar to those of the Moche. Considerable evidence has been forthcoming that the customs and beliefs of these societies have hardly changed for three millenia and show basic structural similarities, especially as to mentality (Duviols 1978, Hocquenghem 1979). If we do not trust that we can use these sources as reference for the task of identification, we must remain silent.

We use these sources because we work on the hypothesis that the cultures in question, at least in some of their conventions, are similar to one another. This hypothesis, the similarity, is a product of our interpretation. Cultures cannot be compared unless they have been interpreted. Their similarity means not only that they shared conventions (i.e. did similar things and had similar beliefs) but also that they had similar modes of thought. This also means in the present case that theirs was different from ours; and this difference, too, is a product of our interpretation.

Identification, in the case of Moche pottery, can only be carried out on the basis of such interpretation; it depends on interpretation. Accordingly, it cannot be proved correct; we can only claim for it a higher or lower grade of probability. The converse, of course, is equally true. Our identifications cannot be proved incorrect just because we use external material. The argument, for instance, that the Incas did not have the same kind of rituals as the Moche cannot be proved correct, even if it is a fact that they were another people and the chronicles record their life from a much later time. One can only argue in this case for or against greater or lesser probability. And to reject any instance of hypothetical identification as wrong, one must criticize the identification in question, not the recourse to hypothesis, for such a criticism carries no weight whatever (unless authority lends it its own).

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We may add that the situation encountered with respect to Moche pottery is much more frequent than many anthropologists would care to consider. The convention used within a known culture often is unknown or not known for certain. Botticelli, for instance, presumably worked in a neo-Platonist context when he painted La primavera; at any rate, the identification of the imagery of this painting requires verbal reference that goes beyond the title.

The interpretation needed for identification in Moche iconography differs, however, from the interpretation we can produce on the basis of images already identified. Description, identification, and interpretation are three different moves. The interpretation that needs to be added to description in order to produce identification differs from the interpretation which uses identified images for offering a characterization of culture. It differs from it in depth, in kind, and as to goal. Identification requires merely the reconstruction of the identity of the painted, or modelled, scenes that are still extant, whereas interpretation also demands the reconstruction of the entire life of the people who produced those select scenes, and the assessment of their culture in relation to ours.

Description

One type of scenes painted, or modelled, on Moche pots shows running figures. The figures are either fully human or composites of men and animals. They appear in some specific landscape (mountain or see) or by themselves. Interspersed with these figures there can be other representations. These include sandy hills, plants belonging to them (e.g. cacti, tillandsia, acacia), parts of plants (beans, acacia branches), animals belonging to them (e.g. snakes, birds, shells), and even man-made objects (head-dresses). The flying animals are hawks and humming birds" in addition, there is a winged insect, a kind of dragon-fly. (Fig. 1 to 7 Lavallée 1970, p. 61, 97, 166, 189, Purin s.d.fasc. I, pl. LV fig. I).

The relationship between these small interspersed figures and the larger running figures is puzzling. It is this relationship that we would like to investigate, choosing here the most conspicuous interspersed animal, the humming bird. We believe that this investigation will give some clue about the nature of the relationship between main figures and interspersed figures on Moche pottery in general.

Identification

Certain actions depicted on Moche pots appear in two parallel versions. One version has to do with a 'real' world, the other version has to do with a 'mythical' world. The 'real' world is populated with human beings, the 'mytical' world is populated with composite creatures, both anthropomorph and zoomorph. We may consider the relationship between the two worlds analogous to the relationship between ritual and myth. If this relationship holds true we can identify the human beings as Moche men, and the composite creatures as their ancestors. In Moche iconography there is also a third world, that of the dead which is intermediary between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors. But since the dead had not instituted the ritual and do not participate in it any more, they are not depicted performing it.

Each kind of action presented in a parallel version cen be identified with some specific ceremony. At Inca times, racing was part of the initiation ritual of the young. This ritual took place at the end of the dry season, before the December solstice. The young had to prove their manhood at the time the vegetation began to sprout. The running figures on the Moche pots can be identified as participating in this ritual (Hissink 1950, Kutscher 1951).

As fas as the humming bird is concerned, we have but little information to rely on. At Inca time, wild bird was burned to lessen the power of the enemy (Rowe 1946, p. 210). Today, young men who want to acquire a good aim are to hunt and to

eat the brains for humming birds. Humming birds are small, light, and quick creatures with a long pointed beak which penetrates small flowers without hesitation and with great accuracy. Obviously, this is a complex quality, a particular kind of vitality, which young men can find useful. Although this evidence is not widely documented it seems to us sound enough, and gives a good hint as to the connection between runners and humming birds. (Personal communication, H. Aguilar.)

Humming birds, by the way, are one of those animals whose shape is merged with the human shape to produce composite beings who populate the 'mythical' world of the ancestors. It is interesting to note that the humming bird as an interspersed figure can accompany the 'mythical' humming bird as well as the other 'mythical' beings engaged in races (cf. figs. 5 and 3 respectively).

Interpretation

The humming bird as interspersed figures are on the one hand representatitions of humming birds and, on the other, they have some symbolic significance. We have already made suggestions about their significance but its is necessary to go into greater detail.

'Symbol' is a general term signifying that an image carries some meaning. The meaning can be directly representational, as when the image of a humming bird signifies 'humming bird.' In such a general context it is immaterial how naturalistic or stylized the image is. What matters is that it should be recognizable (Gombrich 1978, p. 183). The meaning of an image can also be figurative or, as often is called, 'metaphorical.' The image of the humming bird, for instance, also signifies - in the example here considered - acuity.' The expression 'metaphorical,' if so used, is too general, howevern. For 'metaphor' means, strictly speaking, a particular figure of speech, marking a specific relationship between two things.

It is customary to contrast it with metonymy which marks another kind of relationship between two things (Lévi-Strauss 1962 p. 70, 140-141, 271-277, Goodman 1968, Eco 1976).

The metaphorical relationship is one of analogy, the metonymical is causal or one of contiguity. The metonymical relationship can be representational, especially in the kind of metonymy which is called synecdoche, when a part stands for the whole. If we consider the image of the interspersed humming birds as a representational image, signifying 'humming bird,' the image is metonymical. The image still is metonymical, that is, representational, if it serves the purpose of identifying the landscape in which the running figures run. That they may serve such a purpose can be seen from the fact that we have running 'mythical' fish (i.e. composite creatures which are both human and piscine) interpsersed with shells (fig.4). The landscape of the runners among humming birds has, for instance, a single undulating line,signifying hills or mountains, the landscape of the runners among shells clearly indicates waves (figs. 1,3,4). If the humming bird signifies, in addition, or instead, for instance 'acuity,' we have to decide whether the image is metonymical or metaphorical. To the extent 'mythical' humming birds are among the ancestors, the image of humming birds is metonymical, both directly and in the sense that they belong to the 'inscape' of the runners as well as of the Moche who painted them. To the extent, however, birds are not men in the 'real' world, the relationship is metaphorical.

The question, then, is whether the 'real' world for us, and for the Moche, the same is or not. The answer must be that it is not. Accordingly, the image of the humming bird is metonymical for the Moche in all contexts, whereas for us it is metonymical in the context of 'humming bird,' and metaphorical in the context of both 'acuity' and 'inscape.''Acuity' and 'inscape' are a single context because the acuity which the humming birds have and the Moche can have is a quality which only exists in the context of the inscape of the Moche.

Humming birds represent what we called here 'acuity.' We should like to emphasize that 'acuity' is just a short form for a complex of qualities which humming birds exemplify, and which young men participating in the initiation ritual must have in order to pass into the rank of warriors. They must also retain this complex of qualities later; it is, therefore, no wonder that we find humming birds as interspersed figures among warriors in scenes of fighting, and in the scenes of the caturing of prisoners (fig. 7). No wonder either that 'mythical' humming birds appear as runners and warriors (and not as shamans, priests, women, etc.).

It can be stated in general that humming birds only appear in specific cases in which this complex of qualities is needed. They do not appear, for instance, in connection with scenes of divination in which warriors participated but not in their capacity as warriors. At the same time, humming birds in fact do not always appear in the scences specific to them. It is difficult to say why they are omitted in some cases (figs. 2A, 3,4,6). But since they are the question arises whether the function of these figures is decorative. The answer seems to be that they may have a decorative function but their choice, nevertheless, is not arbitrary. In other words, humming birds may or may not appear but they can only appear in specific situations. They always represent a given complex of qualities..

What is true of humming birds as interspersed figures is also true of interspersed figures in general; they always stand in a metonymical relationship to the major figures around them. A very good, and rare, example is that of the head-dress of runners interspersed among runners (fig. 6). Another example is that of the chile pepper interspersed among warriors. The chile is 'strong,' that is, hot, and the the warrior, too, is 'strong.' This metonymical relationship is only established between warriors and chile, the young runners (participating in the initiation scenes) are not yet 'strong' enough to be accompanied by images of this fruit.

Today, the young eat the brain of humming birds, and do not eat the really hot chile, only the mature do (personal communication, H. Aguilar). The image of the chile pepper, accordingly, is not a mere allegory of strength. The image of humming birds, too, is not an allegorical image/ it signifies a complex of qualities specific only to actual humming birds, and not a concept in abstraction.

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Conclusion

We are led to the conclusion that the relation between the interspersed figures and the main figures is metonymical. Since it has become customary to praise the metaphor over the metonomy as the more creative product of the human mind (e.g. Adam/Goldenstein 1976, 163ff), we seem to deprive the Moche of this 'superior' mental faculty. What we in fact do, however, is paradoxical. For the Moche could only produce an integrated world of ancestors and living beings by establishing metonymical relationships. What is 'poetic' for us was 'real' for them. Our 'superiority' of establishing metaphorical relationships turns out to be 'inferior' to their ability to create an integrated world in which inscape and landscape are not divorced from one another. It goes without saying that they had no need for allegories and, in fact, could not have accomodated them; for they had no heaven of concepts cut free from actual reality.

Illustrations

Illustrations are taken, as follows: 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 from Kutscher 1954; 5, 6 form Kutscher, Ms.

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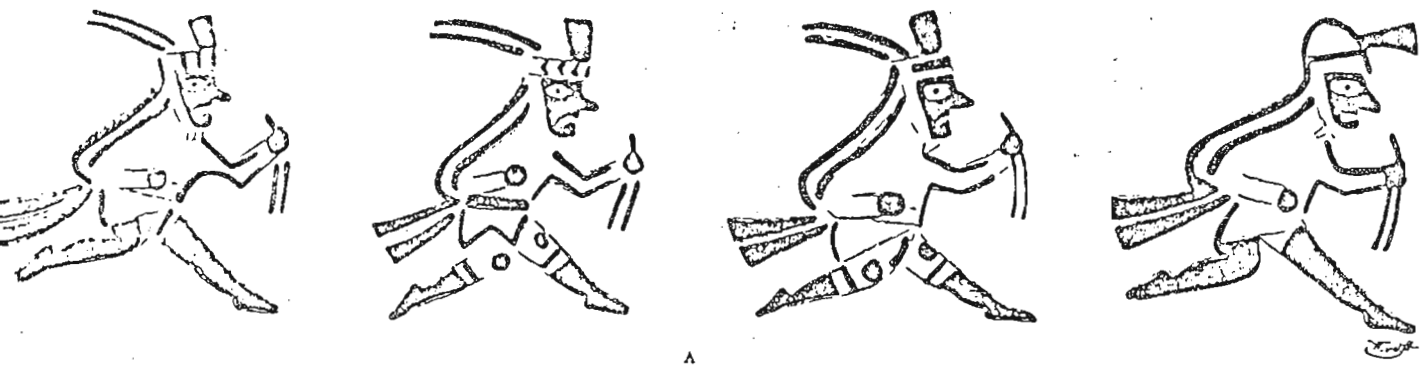

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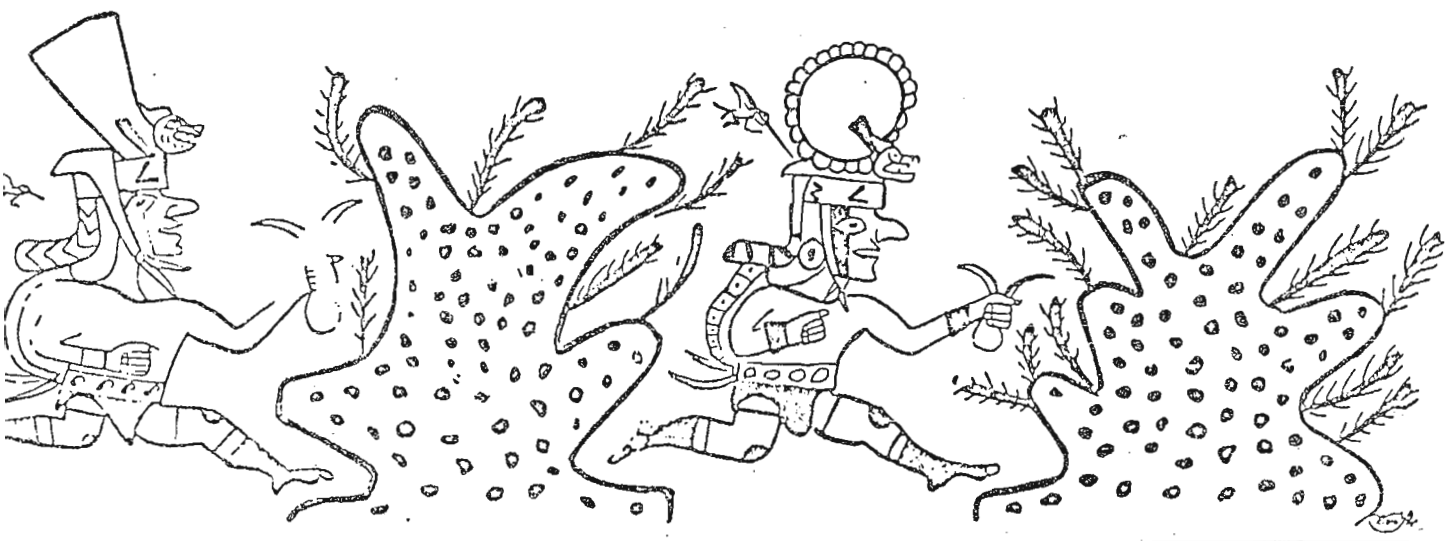

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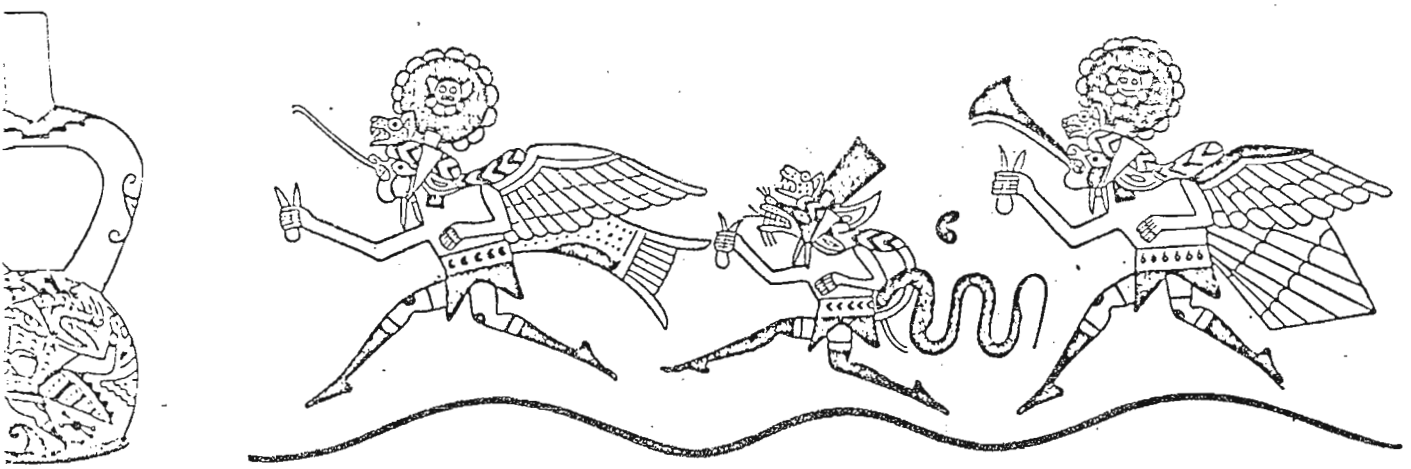

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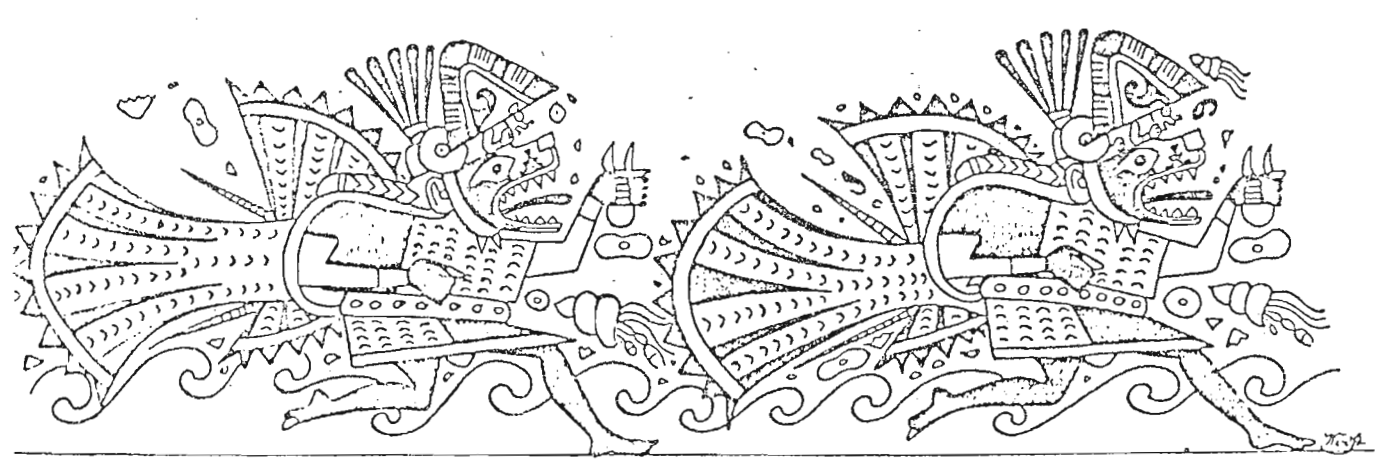

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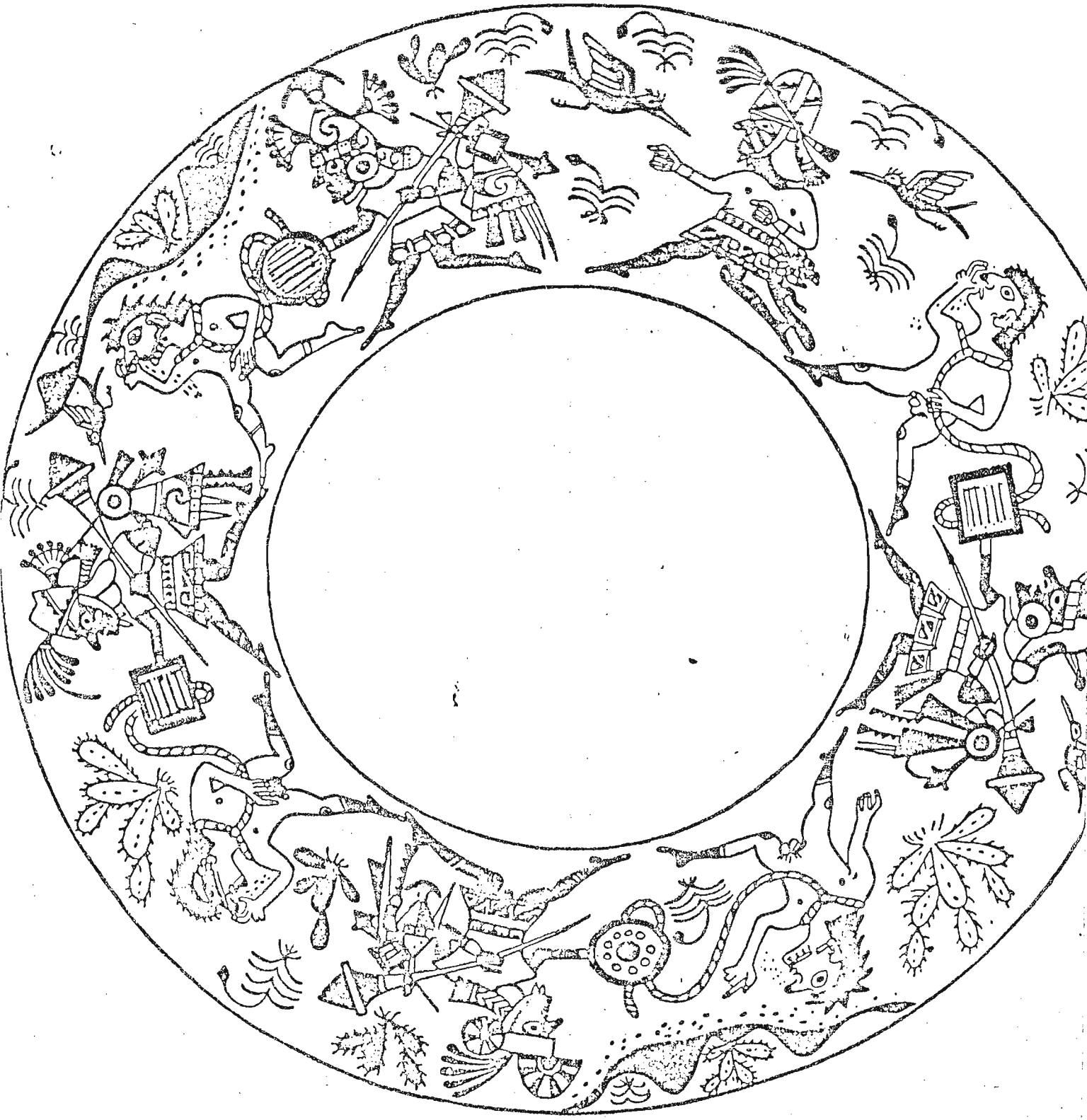

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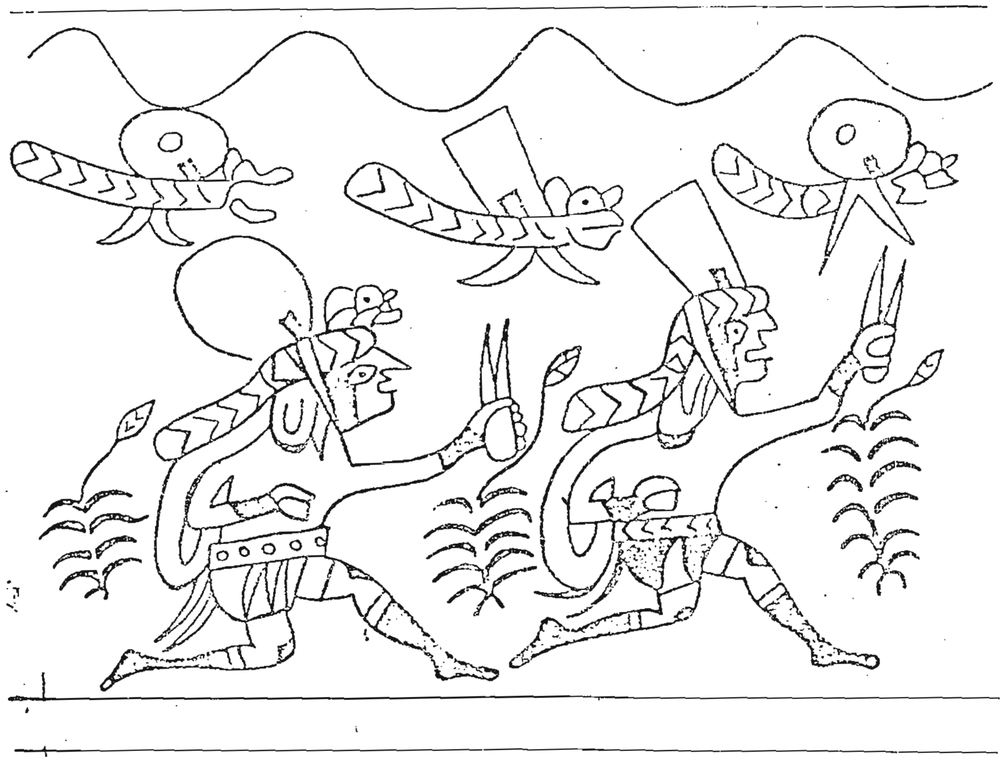

Fig. 6

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