

# Topologies of the Tombs of the Señor de Sipán, Peru: Pope Leo XIV and Cultural Preservation

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## Abstract

This paper (number 5) in the research project “Burying the Dead” follows the introductory comments and typology of previous papers (Aguilar, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b) but moves the material context of historically state sanctioned cemeteries to northwestern Peru. As in previous topologies, this paper outlines the characteristics of special continuity and change on locations where tombs are ordered to understand their significance within a socio-historical location. The burial complex known as el señor de Sipán is in northwestern Peru, at Huaca Rajada, Sipán and was discovered in 1987 within a pre-Incan complex of the ancient Moche culture. This paper examines the topology of the royal tombs that being part of an elite within Moche culture relate to paths into the afterlife very similar to those topologies of the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. Indeed, this paper suggests that topological properties in Sipán show the relatedness between human rationalities in Moche culture and KV55 at the Egyptian Valley of the Kings (paper 6 of this research project). Thus, discussions on *topological places*, *homeomorphisms* and *homotopies* become important agendas for a comparative cultural preservation considering the traditional applications of *natura non facit saltus*.

## Keywords

Peru, El señor de Sipán, Pope Leo XIV, Cultural Conservation, Topology, Moche Culture, Royal Tombs, KV55, Valley of the Kings, Egypt

## 1. Introduction: The Dead and Cultural Preservation

Cultural preservation refers to the efforts made to maintain and protect a culture's unique practices, beliefs and artifacts from being lost and diminished, especially in the face of globalisation. Thus, cultural preservation includes burial sites, cemeteries, graveyards, tombs, and those buildings or landscapes that contain them.

It could be argued that the CSRP research project on “Burying the Dead” of which this paper is the fifth one relates to cultural preservation as far as all papers include the study of topologies, places where the dead are buried, rather than the methods of burying the dead. The linking research question can be summarised as an exploration of the global question: *how are the afterlife and the metaphysical topological spaces represented materially within tombs, burial sites, and buried bodies?*

Concepts usually associated with the change of materiality and the properties of a geometric object have been used during the conceptualisation of the research project. Topology, being the central concept, refers practically to topological spaces as sets endowed with a structure which allows defining continuous deformation of subspaces, and all kinds of continuities. Further, homeomorphism within topological spaces allows for an inverse function that makes the whole analysis connected but different. Thus, archaeological sites and tombs contain a diversity of forms and shapes that allow the description of change and continuity rather than solely what appears nondimensional to the human eye. A homotopy represents a deformation of the topological site that informs change and a diverse synchronic and diachronic understanding, thus allowing for the differential and hermeneutical interpretation of tombs as bearers of diverse semantic meaning in the manner of the diversity of diachronicity within the project.

In paper 1 the topology of the dead in India outlined sites of burial within World War I and World War II in British India and the work of cultural and historical preservation by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (Aguilar, 2024a). In paper 2 the topology of the dead outlined the ordering of the dead in Chilean cemeteries since independence from Spain (1810) until the present day (Aguilar, 2024b). Paper 3 examined the topologies of the dead within the long period of political violence from the 1960s until the 2016 Peace accord, and the recovery of bodies unaccounted for in Medellin (Aguilar, 2025a). Paper 4 examined topological anomalies within burials in Chile, particularly within periods of forced disappearance, the air accident of the Uruguayan plane of 1972, and the world of *animas*, people who died in a violent manner (Aguilar, 2025b).

Within the research project cemeteries have taken precedence because they come out of modernity within a socio-political context of public health policy, state and private ownership and the sense of the family. However, the ancient sense of burial and the afterlife was signified by the construction of important places such as pyramids in Egypt and temples in meso-America that were inhabited by the elites and managed by those who mediated between the living and the dead. They were communal expressions of the existence of hierarchies rather than public policies of inclusion so that pharaohs, kings and queens had a communal power of mediation between mere mortals and the world that awaited death and the post-death of worlds being made through the afterlife.

The post-modernity of cultural preservation represents a post-colonial sense of rights to lands, tombs and patrimony that had not been part of those ancient civ-

ilisations. Thus, looting and archaeology had a clear difference: personal gain vs the discovery of cultural monuments and cemeteries that were very much part of a pre-modern sense of material possession. Instead, cemeteries and tombs in an ancient world were inhabited by the spirits of those who died. Cemeteries and graves were in general avoided by humans and their life concerns for societal life outside the walls and limits of tombs and cemeteries. Indeed, topologies of the dead were topologies of the living and their social constructions of the afterlife. The dead were respected because sooner or later the living were going to join them.

The fear of the dead might be an explanation why the tombs of Sipán were found intact in an area that was peripheral to the roads to the Inca citadels and cities symbolised by the modern imaginary of the majestic heights of Machu Pichu. Indeed, the argument by Yoshida et alia (Yoshida et al., 2024) for Kurdish archaeological sites in Iran and Iraq starts to make sense in every example of cultural conservation:

What all projects have in common is that relationships and cross-sector networks are being established to build a crisis-proof local community that takes care of its cultural heritage. In this way, projects can be implemented that are primarily carried out by local actors, thereby building up expertise that will endure. These projects are the initial attempts to link cultural preservation and social well-being and thus to make a contribution to sustainable development in line with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Yoshida et al., 2024).

In the case of el señor de Sipán the two explanations were valid and sometime complementary, even though at the discovery of the tomb in 1987, Walter Alva and others had to call the police to restore order and limits because of the crowd that was annoyed at the archaeologists because they wanted to get some of the valuable objects for themselves. Alva pushed for a fast digging of the possible tomb because he feared that the site would be open by illegal diggers and all valuable objects would disappear from the tomb. The archaeology team had to sleep in tents to guard the digging site and confronted abuse and misunderstanding by the local population (López & Aguilar, 2017).

Indeed, Yoshida et alia's work for cultural conservation in Iran and Iraq has involved local communities coming out of violent periods of history (Yoshida et al., 2024). However, they have rediscovered their history and at the same time they have affirmed their identity, their basic needs, with added opportunities for employment and sociability. One of those successful places of historical reconstruction was Mosul in northern Iraq where the advance of ISIS in 2014 had destroyed many monuments and archaeological sites associated with historical Christianity and Islam (Aguilar, 2022, 2025c). Such work has required an ongoing exchange with teams of archaeologists and researchers for their benefits. The "Burying the Dead Project" has nevertheless emphasised that contemporary paradigms of cultural exchange require not only a contemporary interaction over periods of field-work (Aguilar, 1998) but the development of an epistemological empathy and re-

spect for the dead.

Egypt has won praises within the international scholarly community by bringing millions of visitors to look at archaeological sites with respect and somehow reverence for such world of the dead rather than the world of the living. The development of museums fit for respect has helped such sense of connectedness between cultural conservation, global conservation and a shared humanity within a critique of traditional sciences such as archaeology, anthropology and Egyptology itself. For example, the pioneer reflections of Angela Stienne on mummies in museums has been a critical reflection on why mummies are so popular and their history (Stienne, 2022). For Stienne had the capacity to work on cultural conservation but to integrate others who could relate to mummies. Stienne who in June 2019 had been invited to lead workshops on Refugee Week at the New Walk Museum in Leicester made the following reflection that has driven years of her contribution to cultural conservation and cultural dialogue by communities with Egyptian mummies:

On that day when we were exploring the *hows* and *whys* of people migrating or seeking refuge in Leicester, I wanted to talk about those who had been forcibly removed from their country and moved to provincial England to be put on public display for the enjoyment of museum visitors (Stienne, 2022: p. 47). (My note: she meant mummies whose bodies were transported into the UK).

Cultural preservation was possible at its best within the Huaca Rajada (el señor de Sipán) because of social respect for the world of the dead. But the world of the living symbolised by the state of Peru, the indigenous peoples and the local Church communities also came together to appreciate the recovery of the royal tombs. In Huaca Rajada there were tombs and human remains of people who lived there before the arrival of the Inca and Spanish empires. Little has been written about the consequences of the archaeological discoveries and the sociology of the contemporary mind vis-a-vis the synchronicity of the discovery. However, the reconstruction of el señor de Sipán challenged the linear sense of a cultural development within time and space. It was understood that the Moche culture and their royals operated before the meso-American topologies of the dead, and the indigenous shrines. Much later, Indigenous beliefs in the afterlife were superseded by the topology of the Incas and then later by the topology and architecture of Spanish Catholicism as understood by the conquistadors.

Such cultural life was not a development by a single encounter in which topologies were set in a linear progression but instead there were moments of intensity, new developments and circular possibilities of anterior inclusivity in a diverse and complex time and space. Indeed, Sabine Hyland's masterpiece on the Catholic priest Juan Bautista de Albadán brings such tapestry of social and divine terror when this priest becomes a killer, an abuser, a torturer, and a thief among the Chankas (1601-1611, Hyland, 2016). For the priest became a diviner of crime that

at the same time represented the authority of the Spanish Empire that was “discovered” in history by the meticulous archival work by Hyland and the cultural preservation of archives and manuscripts. However, Hyland indicates that ‘although the Spanish Church in colonial Peru is often criticised, many Catholic priests and missionaries were honest, caring individuals who did their best for their native parishioners’ (Hyland, 2016: p. 1). That world interpreted by Hyland is comparable to the world of the topology of Sipán where the divine drones are activated by a deep respect for the synergy of the ritual authority that in Peru and Egypt allows the living to become part of the dead and to become alive again in different worlds.

The topologies of the dead have a significance attached by different actors after burial while as I have previously argued, principles of semantic inclusion and exclusion have dominated the world of the living vis-à-vis the world of the dead (Aguilar, 2025b). Thus, human remains become dangerous for those who don’t live the experience of the dying while the attachment to human remains reflects the actual presence of the dead who are still in communion with the living. Those are the mysteries of the consumption of the dead by Uruguayans lost in the Andean mountains who feel deep communion and return to the human remains once and again. It was not the experience of one parent though who decided to take his son’s body back to Uruguay regardless of the decision taken by families to leave the remains in the place where the plane came down rather than to transport the remains elsewhere (Aguilar, 2025a).

These are the questions that the topology of the dead in the case of the tombs at Sipán bring to us. This paper 1) outlines the discovery of these ancient tombs in the context of tombs and graves in Peru, 2) describes the decisions taken regarding those tombs and the construction of the Museum, and 3) analyses the connections made not only on cultural preservation but the reflection on the material divine continuity of humans before the conquest by the Incas and the Spaniards, triggered by Pope Leo XIV. It prepares theoretical background material for the next paper on the series that concerns KV55 in the Valley of the Kings, Egypt (Duhig, 2010).

## 2. Tomb and Material Conservation in Peru

While we tend to associate the discovery of archaeological remains and tombs with historical and archaeological methodologies, Peru and Egypt have been at the forefront of a cultural preservation that takes seriously the recording of material culture. Indeed, lessons have been made since the preservation of the tomb of Tutankhamun discovered a hundred years ago. And while public discourses have centred themselves on the interest of post-colonial policies of repatriation, it must be remembered that there is no repatriation without material conservation. Rights over tombs and artifacts have dominated a global discussion about terms of ownership, private, social and statal, challenged by historical accession to global cultural perceptions of global ownership. The Victorian romantic vision of discovery

has not disappeared, but it has been mediated by the availability of material culture to humanity. Thus, the enemies of conservation are private ownership, including private collectors, and the state ownership of material culture without proper methods and funding for conservation.

In the case of Egypt, laws of ownership and permits over the past fifty years have impeded the pillage by tomb robbers and art collectors with a clear centralisation on the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Cairo and an ongoing post-colonial challenge to Egyptology and the role of private collectors and museums throughout the world. Thus, the foundation and assembling of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) in Giza, Cairo, has provided an Egyptian physical space in which to show Egyptian history by Egyptian academics in connection with other global experts on Egypt. Sadly, the full opening of the Grand Museum has been postponed several times due to war and insecurity in the Middle East while parts of it have been open to the public for months now. Once the GEM is opened in its totality it would be worthwhile to discuss its topology and its future.

Peru has not been behind such discussions because of the nature of excavations and material culture of ancient cultures and indigenous peoples (see for example Esenarro, Ccalla, Yabar, Uribe, Reyes, Santos, Salas, & Condori, 2025). Machu Pichu remains for the global world a centre of attention and the material remnant of indigenous empires that challenged the cultural and political uniformity of the Spanish Empire. Other locations such as the centre of the city of Lima remain protected by international organisations such as UNESCO and the cooperation with Peru has been constant regardless of the Peruvian governments in power or the moments of internal violence and disruption, particularly the preservation of textiles (Grávalos & Bria, 2021). Thus, in the case of el señor de Sipán, once the objects were found and classified, they were sent to labs in Germany for further cleaning and maintenance (López & Aguilar, 2017).

Regarding human remains, cemeteries and tombs in Peru, the laws that regulate such locations come in the first place from public laws of safety and health emanating from the Ministry of Health. Thus, Article 78 del Reglamento de Organización y Funciones del Ministerio de salud dictates that ‘cemeteries and crematoria’ are under the jurisdiction of the Dirección General de Salud Ambiental e Inocuidad Alimentaria (DIGESA <http://www.digesa.minsa.gob.pe/>). There are 10 general laws and decrees that provide the legal norms for the existence and functioning of cemeteries and crematoria in Peru:

Ley N° 26842, Ley General de Salud y Modificatorias.

Ley N° 26298, Ley de Cementerios y Servicios Funerarios y Modificatorias.

Ley N° 27446, Ley del Sistema Nacional de Evaluación de Impacto Ambiental.

Decreto Supremo N° 019-2009-MINAM, Reglamento de la Ley del Sistema Nacional de Evaluación de Impacto Ambiental, Anexo II, Artículo 8, 28 y 30.

Decreto Supremo N° 03-94-SA, Reglamento de Cementerios y Servicios Funerarios.

Ley N° 30868, Ley que modifica la Ley 26298, Ley de Cementerios y Servicios

Funerarios.

Decreto Legislativo N° 1503, Decreto Legislativo que Modifica la Ley N° 26842, Ley General de Salud, y la Ley N° 26298, Ley de Cementerios Y Servicios Funerarios.

Decreto Supremo N° 008-2017-SA, Reglamento de Organización y Funciones (ROF) del Ministerio de Salud.

Resolución Ministerial N° 100-2020-MINSA, Directiva Sanitaria N°087-2020-DIGESA/MINSA, Directiva Sanitaria para el Manejo de Cadáveres por Covid-19 y sus Modificatorias.

Resolución Ministerial N° 467-2017/MINSA, Manual de Operaciones de las Direcciones de Redes Integradas de Salud.

While bureaucracy always dominate life in Latin America, and indeed in Peru, the discovery of the remains of el señor de Sipán at the late stage of 1987 aided the possibility of an orderly work by the archaeological teams as well as an international interest by other experts during this century. Those international teams were already trained in a new professional mindset of work within countries that were not their own. Further, ethical norms for the examination of human remains and those of living tissue were in place in their professional lives. International cooperation and the control of the research project by Walter Alva, aided the delivery of finding and research to other partners. As a result, the comparison between the tomb of Tutankhamun and el señor de Sipán arises once again through the international museum exhibitions dominated and coordinated by the Peruvian team rather than others.

For example, issues of gold materials and corrosion related to the tombs of Sipán were approached through international teams of experts with shared international publications on the physical sciences rather than solely on anthropology, archaeology and ethno-history (Ingo, Bustamante, Angelini, Cesareo, Gigante, Zambrano, Riccucci, Di Carlo, Parisi, Faraldi, Chero, & Fabian, 2013). Indeed, the findings of materials used by those burying el señor de Sipán and the consequences of degradation and soil effects was used by Ingo et alia to learn and produce new techniques for material conservation of ancient material culture:

The present study confirms that the combined use of micro-chemical and micro-structural investigation techniques such as SEM-EDS, XPS, XRD, and OM can be successfully used to investigate the technological manufacturing processes of the ancient coated artefacts and to achieve information about degradation agents and mechanisms useful to define tailored conservation strategies possibly including new, more reliable, and safer materials (abstract, Ingo et al., 2013).

### 3. The Discovery of the Royal Tombs of Sipán

The señor de Sipán in northern Peru, a series of tombs associated with the Lord of Sipán was found in 1987 at Huaca Rajada, Sipán, Peru by the Peruvian archaeologists Walter Alva, Luis Enrique Chero Zurita and Susana Meneses. Every ar-



archaeological site requires a team but in the case of el señor de Sipán, Walter Alba has been associated with the discovery of this royal burial complex. Alba was born in the district of Cajamarca, son of Lorenzo Alba Lezcano and Carmen Alba Mostacero. He studied in the Colegio Nacional de San Juan in Trujillo. After secondary school he joined the Universidad Nacional de Trujillo, where he graduated. In 1977, and later he took over the Museo Bruning in Lambayeque as director. His archaeological excavations included Salinas de Chao (1977), Valle de Zaña (1977-1978), Morro Eten (1979), and Purulén (1983).

In February 1987, Alba was alerted by the police of robbers at a Moche tomb in Sipán, near Chiclayo. That archaeological site was known at that time as Huaca Rajada. Alba, Chero and Meneses worked to secure the tomb and noticed that it had more precious objects than other Moche tombs. Thus, what was to be a rescue operation became a permanent site as there were signs that there might be other tombs as well.

The site was considered unique in Latin America as it was intact and predated the Inca civilisation, dating back to the third century CE, and it was named after a rural town in the Lambayeque Valley of northwestern Peru. El Señor de Sipán was a leader of the Moche civilisation, and the Moche culture and its practices. The name of the site, El Señor de Sipán was given to the first mummy found in a large funerary complex. By 2007, fourteen tombs had been located. According to Alba:

The archaeological site consists of two large and eroded pyramidal structures of adobe (mud brick, and a third, lower and smaller, now known as the funerary platform. This rectangular platform was probably constructed in six phases, sometimes between A.D. 1 and 300 (Meneses & Chero, 1994, cf. Alba, 2001b: p. 223).

The first tomb of El señor de Sipán was discovered by a small Peruvian team of archaeologists who in dramatic fashion had to move a team of tomb robbers. The royal tomb was in the middle of a clay platform located in front of two pyramids with a height of 40 metres and a base of 100 metres. In the words of Walter Alba:

the most important religious shrine of the valley of Lambayeque, in a territory influenced by the Mochica culture (Alba, 2006: p. 198).

The archaeologists excavated a funerary chamber with the señor de Sipán, buried in a wooden coffin, and wrapped in ornaments, standards and clothing made of gold, silver, copper and golden copper, and textiles all symbolising his rank and ritual clothing. Eight mummies as well as animals surrounded him. They included a military chief, three young women, a standard bearer and a child as well as the remains of two llamas and one dog that most probably had been sacrificed first (see Alba, 1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2006; Alba & Donan, 1993).

On the roof of the tomb there were the remains of one guard and a soldier whose feet had been amputated and that symbolically guarded the tomb. In five niches, more than two hundred offering pots were found representing prisoners, fighters, and individuals praying that set very carefully represented a funerary sce-



nography. All remains and ornaments were placed according to notions of dualism and complementarity. Thus, gold ornaments were located to the right and silver ornaments to the left, related to the east and the west, to the sun and the moon, and to the masculine and the feminine (Alva, 2006: p. 198).

More than 600 objects were collected, all those having been used by el señor de Sipán, and certainly symbolisms and ritual inscriptions corresponded to actions in his life and rule, as well as rituals of political and religious life he had presided. Royal ornaments included golden earmuffs associated with fertility rites, and figures of deer associated to the cult of the ancestors (Alva, 2006: p. 200). The excavations over years allowed Walter Alva and team to discover other 14 tombs related to different periods and different royal figures within Moche society. Each tomb represents the role of one important dignitary: two tombs correspond to lords, one to a priest, two to military chiefs, four to fighters and four to assistants to the royal courts. Each tomb and each object have provided the opportunity to reconstruct the socio-political structure of Molla society and of Molla religion in general (for other works on Molla time and history, see Swenson & Roddick, 2018).

One of the characteristics of the discovery and excavation of those tombs within the complex now known as el señor de Sipán was the fact that the tombs had not been disturbed and the whole complex was intact regardless of the tomb robbers that had already located the funerary complex. In summary, “Tomb 1 contained the richest burial, in terms of both the variety and quality of the precious metal objects, ever scientifically excavated in the western hemisphere” (Alva, 2001b: p. 223). For Walter Alva this site wasn’t only a tomb but a monument, and the team started developing a clear systemic understanding of elite burials (Alva, 2001b: p. 223). It is because of this systemic burial that el señor de Sipán started being considered the most important archaeological find in pre-Columbian America acquiring the same status as the tomb of Tutankhamun had acquired in Egypt. Indeed, within the same principle of a site with tombs, temples and monuments to the Pharaohs, the tomb of Tutankhamun became within Egypt central after its discovery in 1922. A royal golden mask and thousands of objects spoke a hundred years ago of a golden moment within Egyptian architectural and archaeological history. Thus, in synchronicity with Walter Alva’s description, the discovery of Tutankhamun by Howard Carter in 1922 also stressed the beauty and power of gold:

In contradistinction to the general dark and sombre effect, due to these unguents, was a brilliant, one might say magnificent, burnished gold mask or similitude of the king, covering his head and shoulders, which, like the feet, had been intentionally avoided when using the unguents. The mummy was fashioned to symbolise Osiris (Carter, 1923/2003: p. 60).

However, as in the case of Egypt, Alva suggested that the place was a mortuary location in which given the signs of power of domination present, only lords were buried. Thus, Alva’s ongoing hypothesis was that each valley had a lord that then was recognised by others with a tomb in this mortuary location, as it would have

been in the Valley of the Kings, Luxor.

I would argue that topology deals with the energising forms of the materiality of a current mortuary place, or cemetery, thus regardless of ongoing engagements by Alva and others, for the purpose of this paper, there was a particular topology in Sipán. Such topology was used to share findings and a way of death and burial with interested parties, and the Museum related to the discovery of El señor de Sipán was built to show publicly this most important mortuary site in northwestern Peru.

#### 4. The Building of a Topological Museum

One the conservation strategies for such an important finding was the creation of a museum known as the Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán, located at the city of Lambayeque, in the department of the same name. The architecture of the museum was that of the ancient and pre-Incan architecture of the Moche culture (I-VII Century C.E.). The Museum hosts more than 2000 golden pieces. Thus, the state, the archaeologists and the community, came together to preserve any future interference with the complex of tombs known as El señor de Sipán.

It is here that new avenues of conservation become better understood through a change in perspective regarding topologies rather than the fitting of human remains within a linear progression of human understanding. Indeed, the sense of trying to find common human patterns of social activity remain the central paradigm of humans' curiosity about other humans, including global studies and Egyptology. But topology already assumes that material objects and spaces represent the possibility of a continuous deformation of subspaces as in the work of geometrical forms and philosophy of Leibniz (*geometria situs & analysis situs*), and the methodological work done by Johann Benedict Listing known as 'Listing numbers' (Peirce, 1992: p. 99). Thus, El señor de Sipán located now within the complementary of archaeological site and museum represents a 'topological space', together with other topological spaces such as the Valley of the Kings and particularly KV55 (Nicholson & Jackson, 2013).

El señor de Sipán never stopped evolving from the moment of the different royal burials, and it continues evolving as constructions and reconstructions of museum pieces and the very face of el señor de Sipán have shown in Peru and throughout the world. Indeed, the Museum of el señor de Sipán arose at a time when the Grand Museum of Cairo has also been sought as a dynamic landscape of the afterlife. The two museums in Peru and Egypt, arose from the soil, far from the urban tradition, not as repositories of objects but as continuities and discontinuities with the past that are present today, and have an impact on the material and metaphysical future. If both museums can be considered topological museums is because they didn't evolve out of the European geometry of linear perfection. Thus, the two museums allowed for geometric objects that are preserved under continuous deformations, such as stretching, twisting, crumpling, and bending; that is without closing holes, opening holes, tearing, gluing, or passing

through itself. Indeed, as the next paper on KV55 will outline, these two existences represented by the museums in Huaca Rajada and the Valley of the Kings provide a geometrical example of fragmentised characteristics such as homeomorphisms and homotopies.

## 5. Pope Leo XIV and Peruvian Cultural Preservation

The links of a Peruvian Museum to the world in the Americas and Europe have been directly related to the position of indigenous peoples as Peruvians and to their pride on their past ancestors, particularly the Inca Empire. Indeed, the contact of the Incas and Europeans was a difficult encounter because of the arrival of Christianity and the imposition of the Spanish Empire of their kind of Christianity. As a result of that difficult encounter indigenous religions were suppressed, cemeteries and shrines destroyed, or Christian places of worship built on the traditional places of indigenous offerings to the land and the pyramids and places of sacrifice and connection with their divinities. Therefore, while there is a significant number of Catholics within Peru, there has been a direct separation between the indigenous gods and the Christian faith so that indigenous practices and Christian practices co-exist together. For the Catholic bishops' indigenous burials and places of indigenous landscapes are remnants of the past while Peru is a country in which most of the population consider themselves Catholics. However, inculturated Catholic liturgies have been the exception and Peruvian Catholics remain traditional in their signs and forms if one compares them with African liturgies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or West Africa in general.

Thus, it was noted when on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 2017, Pope Leo XIV, then bishop of Chiclayo (2015-2023), attended the unveiling of the reconstructed face of el Señor de Sipán at the Museum of Huaca Rajada. This presence provided a continuity with Pope Francis (2013-2025) who led efforts to legitimise indigenous population and their cosmologies as central within the contemporary nations of Latin America. In July 2015, Pope Francis returned to Latin America for his visit to Ecuador, Bolivia, and Paraguay (5-13 July 2015, [Pope Francis, 2015a](#)). During that visit he had the opportunity to share time and to listen to concerns from the indigenous populations, that at time were the recipients of unstable political processes. Indeed, in his address to delegates of the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements he asked the question: 'What can I do, a farmwife, a native woman, a fisherman who can hardly fight the domination of the big corporations?' ([Pope Francis, 2015b](#)). Such concerns were reaffirmed when Pope Francis visited Mexico in 2016 (12-18 February 2016) and he started engaging with the pastoral reality of indigenous populations not only when he visited Chiapas but in his warm words to the Mexican bishops: 'I ask you to show singular tenderness in the way you regard indigenous peoples, them and their fascinating but not infrequently decimated cultures', reminding them that 'the indigenous peoples of Mexico still await true recognition of the richness of their contribution and the fruitfulness of their presence' ([Pope Francis, 2016](#)).

Thus, the presence of the Bishop of Chiclayo in the unveiling of el señor de Sipán's face corresponded to an ecclesial awareness of the ongoing value and history of indigenous cultures such as the Moche in Peru.<sup>1</sup> The tombs of Sipán became central to new thoughts about the pre-inca cultures in Peru and at the possibilities of learning about the past to correct the past and move in peace for the future. The Peruvian Press emphasized in 2017 the respect shown by the Bishop of Chiclayo to the memory of the señor de Sipán, 30 years after the archaeologists' discovery. Once Pope Leo XIV, a Peruvian citizen, was elected Pope, the Peruvian Press remarked on the Pope's attitude of bringing together the archeological findings and the realm of faith, 'an uncommon agenda' (Solar Silva, 2025).

Later, and in 2023, the Bishop of Chiclayo (now Pope Leo XIV) accompanied the Afro-American community of the Zaña District, northern Peru, on an exhibition of their culture, history and music at the Palacio Municipal of Chiclayo. On the Pope's election, the Peruvian Ministry of Culture stated warmly that the actions of Pope Leo when he was bishop of Chiclayo helped to consolidate and to strengthen the regional identity and the historical memory of Peru. Further, the Ministry stressed Pope Leo's integral vision of faith, history and community as a distinctive element in his stay at the Diocese of Chiclayo (Solar Silva, 2025).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper, number 5 in the research project "Burying the Dead" has expanded the theoretical framework of topologies of the dead by exploring the discovery of the tombs at Sipán, northwestern Peru in 1987. This paper outlines the discovery of these ancient tombs in the context of tombs and graves in Peru, it describes the decisions taken regarding those tombs and the construction of the Museum for Royal Tombs, and analyses the connections made not only on cultural preservation but the reflection on the material and divine continuity of humans before the conquest by the Incas and the Spaniards.

By outlining Pope Leo XIV's interest in these processes of material conservation, the paper has also emphasised the current cooperation between the state, indigenous and charitable organisations in Peru. The paper reaffirms the importance of topology for the understanding of places of burials and tombs and the certitude of the dictum *natura non facit saltus* for the study of burials and tombs globally. By examining topology, *topological places*, *homeomorphisms* and *homotopies*, this paper provides a reaffirmation of the changeable nature of burials, theoretical background material for the next paper on the series that will examine topology vis-à-vis tomb KV55 in the Valley of the Kings, Egypt.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

<sup>1</sup>Fundación Milarepa, *Notes & Records* LXVI.7.2 and *Diaries* 2025.7.1 (celeste) for historical details, commentaries by the Editor of the Bulletin of Vatican Diplomacy on Pope Leo XIV engagement with material culture and records of the Vatican Museum, forthcoming in M.I. Aguilar, Pope Leo XIV.

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