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Conversations Elevated: On High Altitude Archaeology and the Anthropology of Sacred Mountains. In Conversation with Constanza Ceruti

Constanza Ceruti

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in conversation

conversations elevated: an interview with constanza ceruti on high altitude archaeology and the anthropology of sacred mountains

constanza ceruti

Introduction

Constanza Ceruti is an Argentine anthropologist, archaeologist, historian and mountaineer. She is a professor of anthropology at the Catholic University of Salta (UCASAL) in Salta, Argentina, where she holds the Constanza Ceruti Honorary Chair in Sacred Mountains. She is a member of the National Academy of Sciences (ANCBA) and the National Council for Scientific Research (CONICET) in Argentina.

Ceruti's fieldwork focuses on high altitude archaeological sites, which has led her to climb over 100 mountains taller than 5,000 meters (17,000 feet). At these dangerous and inhospitable sites, she studies the connections between mountain landscapes, ritual, and bodily human remains. She is best known internationally for her work on the mummies of Inca child sacrifices at Llullaillaco.

Ceruti has authored more than a dozen books on the anthropology of sacred mountains. Her book *Llullaillaco* was dedicated to the analysis of the sacrifices and offerings performed

by the Incas at the highest ceremonial site on the planet (EUCASA, 2003 and Mundo Editorial, 2015c). *Inca Rituals and Sacred Mountains*, co-authored with Johan Reinhard (UCLA, 2010), explored the relationships between archaeological sites and the natural environment, arguing that ritual sites must be considered in the broader context of the landscapes where they are found. Her book *Ambassadors from the Past* (Mundo Editorial, 2014) offered a cross-cultural examination of mummies and other preserved corpses. More recently, she has been writing about sacred mountains in Easter Island, Thailand, Southern Italy, Costa Rica, Galicia, the Basque Country, Ireland, the Canary Islands, Scotland, Australia, the Pyrenees, Norway, and Iceland (Figure 1).

Interview

What constitutes "high altitude archaeology"? What are some of the unique challenges and opportunities of this type of work?

High altitude archaeology, in a strict sense, is the scientific study of the use of Andean mountains above 17,000 feet (5000 meters) by the Inca civilization. Five hundred years ago, the Incas were the first known culture in history to climb above 20,000 feet (6000 meters) to make offerings and sacrifices. At these extreme altitudes, rituals were performed to commemorate important moments in the life of the Inca emperor, to achieve success in war, to ensure the fertility of crops, or to appease angry spirits that caused natural catastrophes. The processions towards the mountains underlined the sacredness of the Andean geography and asserted the Inca's domination on the newly conquered territories.

The survey and excavation of mountaintop shrines is an important part of high altitude archaeology, but my research also includes the documentation of way stations and climbing routes to the summits—the logistical aspects of ancient pilgrimages organized by the Inca state—as well as manifestations of modern mountain worship.

The environmental challenges are similar in all mountain ranges, but they are considerably more difficult to overcome in the Andes. The Andes are higher than every other mountain range except the Himalayas. The glaciers are less

*This interview has been edited by Andrew T. Coates for length and clarity.

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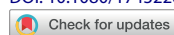


FIG 1

Unearthing an Inca Mummy at the Summit of Llullaillaco, Argentina. Photo courtesy of Constanza Ceruti.



accessible. The peaks are located hundreds of kilometers away from the nearest settlement (unlike the Alps). Average temperatures in the Andes are considerably colder than they are in other ranges.

In the early days, I worked without access to proper technical equipment, without the assistance of helicopters, and without the possibility of emergency calls. Many times, I ended up doing my climbs solo, under-equipped and with hardly, if any, institutional support.

For many years, I was the only woman engaged in this research. This gave me the opportunity to be part of scientific discoveries that were considered among the most important in the late twentieth century. It also allowed me to explore some of the most pristine areas of our world, and live among very wise mountain people (Figure 2).

What are some of your most memorable experiences from your fieldwork at high altitudes?

Climbs undertaken at midnight, the sound of crampons squeaking and cracking on the ice; walking without headlamps under the starry skies; the sublime sunrises from Andean mountaintops; the toxic fumes of the active volcanoes; the terrifying lightning storms in the high camps; the never-ending marches to

the volcanoes across puma territory; hitch-hiking to everything that moves in the remote highlands (including freight trains); seating on the outside of trucks full of minerals with temperatures of -20°C ; the folk tales told by Andean pilgrims during the high altitude processions; the toothless smiles of the elders that welcomed us in their huts after a climb; drinking soup made of charqui from the ears of a llama... these are my most treasured memories.

You are best known internationally for the discovery of the Incan child sacrifice mummies at Llullaillaco in 1999. Can you describe the circumstances of that excavation? How did it change scholarly understandings of the Inca?

In 1999, I codirected the project to the highest archaeological site in the world and I co-discovered three extraordinarily preserved ice mummies. We conducted this research on the summit of mount Llullaillaco (at 6,739 meters) together with *National Geographic* explorer Johan Reinhard and a group of students and collaborators. We worked for a month on the mountain—two weeks on top of the volcano, nearly seven kilometers above sea level—and we discovered and brought to safety the frozen bodies of three Inca children. These are some of the best-preserved mummies ever found. In addition to



FIG 2

Climbing to the highest archaeological site in the world on Mount Llullaillaco, Argentina. Photo courtesy of Constanza Ceruti.

protecting the frozen mummies from destruction by treasure hunters, climate change, and the impact of mining, we excavated a vast array of offerings, including pottery and miniature figurines, which turned out to be one of the best documented and best preserved collections of Inca artifacts in existence.

For six years, I coordinated interdisciplinary research on the findings at the Catholic University of Salta. I also analyzed dozens of historical sources, including chronicles written by the Spanish conquistadors and manuscripts authored by Indigenous priests, in search for a deeper understanding of the symbolic meaning and social uses of the items we excavated. Thanks to our work on Llullaillaco, it became possible to gain solid archaeological perspective on the elaborated Inca ceremonies of *capacocha*, which were otherwise known mainly from the writings (and the viewpoint) of the European colonizers.

The mummies and offerings from mount Llullaillaco are currently preserved at the Museum of High Mountain Archaeology (MAAM) in Salta, which has been popularly

voted as the best museum in Argentina. And, thanks to our work, the Llullaillaco volcano has been added to the UNESCO world heritage list.

How do you situate your work within the broader fields of archaeology/anthropology? What are the methods, approaches, and frameworks you have found most useful to high altitude work? In what ways does your work intervene in the field?

Cognitive approaches to the study of beliefs and rituals have offered an important theoretical perspective to examinations of the symbolic dimension of mountain worship, past and present. I have also always chosen to include socio-political aspects in my analysis. Methodologically, I think it is necessary to combine archaeology with ethnography and ethno-history. I also think it is critical to consider the ways mountains work in the strengthening of local identity, the preservation of heritage, and the development of tourism.

Your larger body of work examines not just Inca sites, but sacred mountains around the world. Please explain: what makes a mountain "sacred?" What are some notable examples of sacred mountains you

have examined and how do they differ from ordinary mountains? What are some commonalities of sacred mountains around the world?

The books and articles I am writing on the anthropology of sacred mountains are based on personal field experiences, which include mountain ascents, pilgrimages, visits to museums and historical monuments, participation in religious ceremonies, as well as informal interviews conducted in Spanish, English, and Italian.

The Andes are perceived as inherently sacred. In other parts of the world, it is the role of mountains as abodes of deities or destinations for pilgrimages that defines their sacred character. In Thailand, for example, the sacredness of a peak is enhanced by the presence of temples, shrines or images that contain alleged relics of Buddha or the ashes of ancient kings.

I have climbed notable examples of sacred mountains, such as: the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona (abode of the Kachina spirits for the Hopi), the Hawaiian volcanoes Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, Lanín volcano in Patagonia, Mount Olympus in Greece, Mount Vesuvius and Mount Stromboli in Italy, Croagh Patrick in Ireland, and Canigó in France. I ascended the highest peaks in Norway, Sweden, and Slovenia, and I also climbed in Croatia and Poland, taking the opportunity to explore the sacred dimension of mountains for Arctic and Slavic peoples.

I solo-climbed some of the “giant” peaks in the Alps, including Gran Paradiso and Monte Rosa, and I studied Roccamelone, the highest shrine in Europe, and a destination of high altitude pilgrimage since medieval times. I have ascended dozens of peaks in the Dolomites and Spain, and published numerous articles on Ladino and Basque mountain folklore. Religious images and votive deposits on Mount Aneto, the highest peak in the Pyrenees, and Mont Perdu, the highest limestone massif in Europe, have also been the object of my academic attention.

How does the “sacredness” of mountains change depending on the cultures/communities close to that particular mountain? Likewise, how do the specifics of altitude, peak

shape, geology, or region affect the sacredness of sacred mountains? In other words, how do sacred mountains in the Andes differ from, say, sacred mountains in the Alps or the Himalayas?

It is difficult to determine commonalities of sacred mountains around the world, but conic shapes, isolated settings, altitude, and prominence all work in favor of the quasi-universal perception of mountains as places of power. In the Andes of northern Chile and Argentina, there is a higher degree of sacredness associated with volcanoes that give origins to rivers or have permanent snow covers, since they are perceived as “providers of water.” This role of mountains is particularly crucial for the herders of llamas in the extremely dry environment of the Atacama Desert in Chile. Logically, concerns about water scarcity do not top the list in places like Scotland or England, where the “sacred” dimension of mountains has a different connotation, linked to the presence of fairies, elves, etc. Among alpine mountains, an elaborated syncretism has been interwoven between ancient beliefs, deities introduced by the Roman Empire, and Christianity. Such is the case of “Giove Penino,” a well-known Roman deity (Giove) “adapted” to the Celtic Lord of the Forest (Pan), and eventually replaced by the Catholic devotion to San Bernardo de Acosta.

My experience in the Himalayas includes having hiked along the Khumbu Valley to the foot of Everest in winter over two decades ago. At the time, I was one of the few westerners in the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries of Tengboche and Pangboche. In the Himalayas, mountains are perceived as abodes of Hindu deities—such as Shiva and Parvati—and are associated with syncretic images of the Buddhist “Guardians of Dharma,” derived from demonic figures in the ancient Bon shamanism.

One of the central themes of your work is that archaeological sites must be understood in relation to the natural landscapes around them. Can you elaborate on this? What kinds of insights are gained by thinking about human-made sites in relation to the natural landscape?

Inca sites were designed to connect with, as well as enhance, the majesty of the surrounding landscape: monumental architecture included wall openings and terraces oriented towards particular features, such as abrupt peaks or waterfalls. Examples of this can be found in Machu Picchu and other sites along the famous Inca trail. Yet some of the most interesting Inca sites comprise just minimal stone circles, ceremonial rectangles or low platforms. These are strategically located on magnificent mountaintop settings.

The priests that came to the Andes during the Spanish conquest noticed that some of the most important places of worship did not require large buildings or temples, but always involved a connection with a *huaca*, a “receptacle of the sacred” embodied in either a mountain, a sacred rock, or an ancient adobe pyramid of a previous coastal civilization.

The Minoan civilization in Crete built monumental palaces—such as Knossos—articulated with small shrines on nearby peaks, and their visual connection was underlined with the presence of “horns of consecration.” Customarily oriented towards a sacred hill, the horns of consecration provided a visual frame to enhance the view of the peak during ceremonies conducted at the palace. The function of the “horns of consecration” was not properly understood until the sacredness of the mountain was brought into the picture.

In the late nineteenth and twentieth century, heavily industrialized and westernized perceptions of landscapes—mainly as a “provider of resources”—resulted in the distinctive architecture of skyscrapers, with cities built like soaring island-mountains of concrete. The twenty-first century is seemingly bringing us back to more traditional concepts of culture (architecture in particular) as embedded in nature. Landscape archaeology is now illuminating the millenary history of the organic connections between human-made sites and nature.

Many of the sites you’ve examined are not just remote—they require very specific kinds of bodily training to access. I imagine this gives you some interesting insight into the lived experiences of the people you’re studying, since they too would have faced immense physical challenges to interact with these sites. My question is: How does the body of

the archaeologist/anthropologist become implicated in high altitude work? How would you reflect on your own embodiment’s role in shaping your work on sacred mountains?

The body of the archaeologist becomes directly implicated in every stage of high altitude work, but “the matter has to follow the spirit,” as I like to tell myself. Not particularly fit, and endowed with a severe scoliosis, I customarily carry backpacks that are three times heavier than advisable. During surveys, I have sometimes walked non-stop for twenty-four hours, on altitudes above 20,000 feet, with an injured ankle. Working in the high Andes is extremely challenging for the body, due to factors such as hypoxia and negative temperatures, which are even more extreme than in the Himalayas. I have been in the field with mountaineers who had lost fingers to frostbite and I know a local guide who lost all his toes due to a storm on Mount Aconcagua.

During excavations, it is oftentimes necessary to remove one’s gloves in order to touch the sediment, write down notes, take photographs, etc. Uncovered skin will start freezing in less than half a minute under these conditions. Exposure to the cold is even more extreme when you are kneeling for hours on frozen ground, surrounded by snow, whipped by strong winds and with temperatures well below freezing.

I have experienced repeated blisters in my fingers due to second-degree frostbite, and a couple of times I ended up with excruciating pain in my toes. After three weeks of work on Mount Quehwar, above 20,000 feet, during a rescue mission to retrieve a mummy that had been destroyed by treasure hunters in the seventies, I had to go to the hospital and get checked by specialists. At the time, they could not immediately rule out amputation. Thanks to the mountain spirits, I have kept all my toes and fingers in place, although I am not sure about my oxygen-deprived neurons!

Related to the previous question: to conduct archaeological work at high altitude sites, the body of the scholar requires augmentation with modern technologies (coats, bottled oxygen, GPS trackers, etc). How does the entanglement of bodies and technologies at high altitude today offer insight into the religious significance of sacred mountains in premodern times

(conversely: how might this contemporary entanglement distract the scholar)?

For me, the lack of entanglement with technology has been a hidden blessing, since it has brought me closer to a first-hand understanding of the human-mountain connection in pre-modern times. In general, I am concerned about the potential loss of innate skills caused by overreliance on technology. I prefer to rely on traditional wisdom, personal experience, and sometimes, sheer determination. I have never used bottled oxygen, for example, and I have always navigated my way on the mountains without GPS.

I am perpetually underequipped for reasons that would be too long to explain: among them, the cost of mountaineering gear where I live is prohibitive and many items are simply unavailable. But this has not stopped me. I successfully climbed Aconcagua—the highest mountain in the western hemisphere—twice, facing temperatures of -40°C with just regular hiking boots instead of the “technical” double plastic boots that were in use at the time. This was two years before I got my first (and only) duvet parka, which I inherited from another climber. I guess this forced austerity keeps me dangerously close to the experiences of ancient high altitude climbers. And it surely prompts my heartfelt

prayers to the mountain spirits in request for their protection during my ascents (Figure 3).

I know you're kidding, but, since it's come up a few times and since this is a religious studies journal, can you say more about the mountain spirits? Did the Inca understand mountains to be inhabited by spirits? Are the mountains spirits themselves? Something else? How did people establish and maintain relations with the mountain spirits? What are some of the specific materials or objects that facilitated these relationships?

For many years I have been going into the field with Andean climbers, for whom even a modest ritual carries enormous importance. Consequently, asking for “permission” from the mountains is always one of the first steps in every ascent. We customarily simplify the process by burying a piece of candy or some chocolate at the foot of the peak.

The ancient Incas—and virtually all modern Andean groups—understand mountains as living entities, with an intrinsic spiritual dimension. In Quechua language, the physical aspect of a mountain is described with words such as “*orqo*” or “*raju*,” that oftentimes become part of the name of a certain peak (for example Puca Orqo, the Red Hill or Pampa Raju, the Flat Peak). In contrast, the spiritual dimension is alluded with the word “*Apu*,” which translates roughly as “Lord.”

FIG 3

Participating in the Qoyllur Ritti Festival in the Andes of Peru. Photo courtesy of Constanza Ceruti.



Mountain spirits or *Apus* are invoked when asking for blessings from the mountain (in the form of rain for the crops or fertility of the herds), or alternatively, when offerings and sacrifices are presented to appease the mountain's fury.

Not unlike humans, the *Apus* are endowed with distinctive personalities, and according to the Quechua farmers, they even share personality traits with the children that are born under their protective gaze. Among the Aymara herders in the Bolivian highlands, when an elder dies, he or she becomes part of the *Achachila*, the spirit of the snow-capped peak that overlooks the village.

Mountain spirits are customarily propitiated with *chicha* (corn beer), *trago* (alcoholic drinks), coca leaves, food offerings, and even sacrifices of llamas, under special circumstances. One of the favorite "foods" for the *Apus* is *mullu*, a seashell from the Pacific Ocean, which is also believed to call the rain. This seashell (spondylus) is often found in the archaeological record, both in its natural shape and carved into figurines or beads.

Relations with the mountain spirits are also built on pilgrimage and ritual dances. The most important collective high altitude pilgrimage in Peru is undertaken to the glaciers of a sacred peak named *Colque Punku* (Silver Gate), to a

place where a sacred rock has been covered with a painting of Jesus Christ. Lord Jesus and *Apu Ausangate* (the most important mountain in the area) are both invoked as *Taytacha Qoyllur Rit'i* (Father of the Star of Snow), and ceremonial dances are held in the Taytachás honor. Priests who are also anthropologists have extensively studied these and other syncretic aspects of Andean popular Catholicism (Figure 4).

How do you understand mummies in your work? What role do they play at high altitudes (perhaps in forging relationships with the mountain spirits)? How should scholars understand the relationship between mummies and the natural landscape of mountains?

Paleo-pathologists usually define mummies as dead bodies that preserve soft tissue beyond the expected period for decomposition. Mummies can be embalmed or preserved by natural processes such as freezing, ventilation, or dehydration.

In the Inca world, the mummies played very active roles in society. The corpses of former Inca emperors were preserved in their palaces, where they allegedly "gave advice" to their descendants. These mummies were publicly paraded around the plaza of the capital city of Cusco on certain ritual occasions.

FIG 4

Inca offerings from Mount Lulllaillaco. Photo courtesy of Constanza Ceruti.



The children sacrificed on the mountains were thought to become intermediaries between the humans and the *Apus*. They would intercede in case of natural catastrophes and request supernatural support for the battles undertaken by the Inca. Given the otherworldly diplomatic role attributed to these children, and the exquisite regalia with

which they were buried, it seems fair to describe them as “ambassadors” to the realms of the mountain spirits. In a poetic way, mummies can also be understood as ambassadors from the past to the present. I consider mummy studies to be a way in which these emissaries from ancient civilizations are able to tell their stories once again (Figure 5).

FIG 5

Performing Hair Analysis on the Frozen Mummy of the Llullaillaco Boy at Universidad Católica de Salta, Argentina (UCASAL). Photo courtesy of Constanza Ceruti.



FIG 6

Constanza Ceruti climbing Gran Paradiso in the Alps. Photo courtesy of Constanza Ceruti.

What are your current and planned research projects? Where do you see opportunities for future high altitude research?

I do not want to end this interview on a pessimistic note, but the panorama, in some parts of the world, is quite somber at the moment. Future opportunities for high altitude research are becoming more dependent upon variables that are increasingly not in the hands of the scholars and explorers. The global pandemic caused by Covid-19 has only exacerbated underlying conflicts related to politics and competing claims on cultural heritage sites. In a post-pandemic era, I wonder how and when will mountain processions and collective rituals be resumed after being restricted? There are many questions to which we do not have answers. We live in a context of prolonged uncertainty. Travel limitations have already negatively impacted the possibilities to do fieldwork and share the results in conventional academic gatherings. In my view, this is simply a challenge that makes us stronger. But freedom is an absolutely necessary condition for the higher expressions of the human spirit—religious, scientific, sportive, artistic and academic. And the study of mountain pilgrimages, past and present, means a combination of all of the above (Figure 6).

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