Studying a time when pots were wealth

Symbols of wealth and status are evident everywhere we go in today's modern materialistic society. From a Gucci bag to a Prada boot, these are the symbols that are meant to differentiate the "haves" from the "have-nots."

Brand names and icons hold much of the sway over the difference between popular and passé. If an entertainment icon such as Jessica Simpson comes out with a new clothing line, thousands will flock to get these latest must-have textiles along with their necessary load of accessories.

This phenomenon is not new, and not even necessarily American, and may even be evident in early cultures as they change from a rural cluster of autonomous groups into a world empire through the consolidation of power.

This is beginning to answer why people made such detailed pots and why they were so widely distributed throughout the region. To do this, Vaughn has been looking for clues in the pottery itself.

Excavations of some of the early Nasca sites have revealed that the polychrome pottery was used by all inhabitants, regardless of social status. A chemical analysis of 166 pieces of pottery from the region has produced similar results for nearly all of the fragments, indicating that the Nasca peoples had a specific recipe for their pottery and most likely used the same type of clay as well.

Next, Vaughn set out in search of local clay deposits over a 22-mile stretch of river valley inside the early Nasca territory. Findings from these analyses indicated there were a wide variety of clay types available in the region, but only one gave a chemical fingerprint similar to that of the Nasca pottery. This pinpointed one location, near the Nasca ceremonial site called Cahuachi, as the sole possible area where the pottery was being produced.

From these findings related to the quality of the pottery, the restricted area of production, and the wide distribution of polychrome pottery, Vaughn has surmised that the polychrome pots of the Nasca were used as "prestige goods" by the rising Nasca elite. These individuals may have been the religious icons of their day using these pots, with their printed religious symbols, in rituals that were supposed to help improve agricultural fertility.

What these members of the emerging elite had, the people wanted. By controlling the polychrome production, high-status individuals were able to establish and maintain their power in the eyes of the people.

Vaughn's research has helped to shed light upon a little-known civilization that flourished into the large imperial Incan empire. He has been able to identify a possible connection between the consolidation of power and the control of the production of material goods by early elite-status popular icons. In today's Western culture this type of power is evident in our daily lives. But rather than a political power, it is an economic one that can reign over how and where we spend our money and what "prestige goods" we may purchase.

Jason de Koff is a doctoral student in the agronomy department at Purdue University.