New developments in the natural sciences are contributing to new thinking on the nature of matter, materiality and being. Such re-visioning of the natural world is, in part, responsible for ‘the ontological turn’, a trend clearly visible in recent archaeological discourse. In combination with evolving relational and symmetrical approaches to investigating the constitution of ‘the social’, the door is open for exploring logics, taxonomies and understandings of reality different from our own in studies of the past. Applying these ideas to the investigation of early imperialism, this paper offers an analysis of a key element in the repertoire of Inca material culture that forwards the importance of human–thing relations in the context of early state politics. Working from the basis of the imperial Inca ceramic assemblage, the study examines how these objects were deployed in the task of empire-building and what insights they provide into Andean ontological commitments during the late pre-Columbian period. An argument is developed that imperial pots were construed as animate beings and agents of the State. The study brings to the fore the mutually constituted nature of the imperial Inca project and suggests new avenues for future research that highlight the matter of early empires.

An anthropological archaeologist, Tamara Bray specializes in the study of the Inca Empire and late pre-Columbian societies of the northern Andes. She has over 25 years of field and research experience in Andean South America where she has conducted significant research into long-distance trade, imperial frontiers, Inca architecture, and comparative studies of Inca ceramics and iconography in Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Peru and Bolivia. In 2016, she initiated a new field project in Copacabana, Bolivia, a key Andean pilgrimage center from Inca times to the present with grant support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Humanities Center at WSU.

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