

Organization and Variability among Middle Sicán Elite Burials in Peru

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Abstract

Recent excavation of some two dozen intact tombs dating to different moments of the Middle Sicán period (AD 900-1100) at the monumental Huaca Loro temple mound documented considerable variability in tomb construction, size, shape, orientation, and artifactual and osteological content. Covariation and continuity among them are discussed and compared with previously documented tombs in the broader Lambayeque region of Peru.

Background

Since 1990, the Sicán Archaeological Project has been engaged in interdisciplinary, investigation into thousand year-old Middle Sicán mortuary practices as a means for reconstructing its social organization and religion. Our search for undisturbed burials pertaining to different social segments focused on the Middle Sicán capital of Sicán. The immediate vicinity of the temple mound of Huaca Loro had largely escaped the modern, organized, large-scale grave looting that wrought havoc elsewhere at this site. We have conducted two long seasons (1991-2 and 1995-6) of burial excavations and two additional seasons (1994, 1997) of complementary excavations and ground-penetrating radar (GPR) surveys defining the extent and organization of the cemetery and associated activity areas at Huaca Loro. GPR survey and accompanying test excavations in 1997 and more extensive GPR survey in 2005 revealed an intact burial ground *circa* 20m E-W x 55m N-S and at least one deep shafttomb *circa* 5 m below modern surface in the flat, featureless area at the west base of the Huaca Loro mound.

To take full advantage of the intact cemetery, from late July to early December, 2006, we excavated a contiguous 320 square meter area with the aims of (1) defining the spatial and temporal distribution of burials interred there, (2) defining variation in funerary treatment, contents and structures, and (3) documenting evidence of post-primary interment dead-living interaction. In this paper we present salient findings in regard to the first two aims and discuss their broader significance.

Distribution and Variability among Excavated Burials

We excavated in total (a) three square and 19 rectangular funerary structures of diverse size, (b) one conical pit containing a disarticulated, incomplete skeleton, - a clear

case of secondary burial, (c) one square shaft with no skeletal or artifactual contents, (d) an inferred square shaft with one skeleton and a niche that contained a painted cloth-lined cane-frame “box” filled with 90 fine ceramic bottles and other offerings, and (e) two square shafts, each with a large niche containing a sumptuous cache offering but *no* skeletal remains. One square and one rectangular funerary structure were exceptionally large, complex in form and organization of artifactual and skeletal contents; these were designated Tombs 1 and 2, respectively. With the exception of Tomb 2 to be discussed later, the other rectangular graves each contained one partial or complete human skeleton that was most commonly placed head to the south in an extended dorsal position. Except for Tomb 1, the three square graves each contained a seated, cross-legged individual, one facing the East and the other two West.

A few seemingly significant spatial patterns can be discerned in this map showing the distribution of excavated burials. First, there is a notable clustering of burials around Tombs 1 and 2.

Tomb 1 is a 3.5x 3.7 meter and 5-meter deep shafttomb. The content of the funerary chamber situated at the bottom of the shaft was organized around a central, seated and cross-legged young woman. A large, elaborately painted cloth and *circa* 13-cm wide cloth strips decorated the chamber peripheries encircling her, associated head ornaments, and other grave goods. The last included two decorated copper-silver *tumi* knives, a copper-silver pedestaled cup, a copper mask, two *Spondylus* shells, 19 ceramic bottles, a bundle of cast and forged arsenical copper implements, and 61 crudely hand modeled *crisoles*. In front and inside the south wall niche were a skull and seven camelid feet. Laid in front of this niche and covered by a painted cloth was a tightly flexed adult woman, presumably sacrificed. Stylistically, all grave goods pertain to early Middle

Sicán, *circa* A.D. 1000, and all tomb contents appear to have been deposited in a single episode. No evidence of post-interment alterations was found.

Placed along the north and east edges of the mouth of Tomb 1 were two neonates whose poorly preserved skulls show traces of cinnabar paint. The style and form of the associated grave goods place these neonates in early Middle Sicán. Four other burials were placed within 20-30 cm from the edges of Tomb 1 at different phases within the Middle Sicán period. Two of the tightly juxtaposed graves each contained an adult man, while the third held an adult woman. The remaining burial to the east pertains to a juvenile.

Tomb 2, situated 12 m south of Tomb 1, has a complex organization unlike any Middle Sicán funerary structure documented thus far. A large 7.3x3.2 m rectangular area 1.5 m in depth is longitudinally partitioned into three levels. What appears to be a single painted cloth on a cane frame, *circa* 1.4 m wide and over 10 m long, covered diverse grave goods on the floor of the upper and middle levels that had been partially covered with cinnabar paint. These goods included a small gold ingot, diverse arsenical copper objects, llama heads and feet, 963 *crisoles*, and 12 fine decorated ceramic bottles that stylistically date to late Middle Sicán, *circa* A.D., 1050-1100.

The north end of the lower level goes downwards to another level and contained two nested burial chambers, Chambers 2 and 3. The larger, Chamber 2, was prepared first and contained what remains of an elaborate early Middle Sicán burial disturbed in ancient times. The remains included a partial skeleton of the inferred principal personage, a juvenile, a sacrificed female adult, 13 fine ceramic bottles, 11 miniature ceramic bottles and five clusters of arsenical copper objects.

Like Tomb 1, the second burial cluster also was a result of at least two distinct episodes of interment, early and late Middle Sicán. Both clusters are notable in that multiple burials were placed in extremely close proximity with little damage in spite of temporal separation of up to two or more generations. Just east of the Tomb 2 burial chambers, an adult female skeleton with numerous grave goods was placed just above another adult woman whose head and lower legs were missing. The burial of yet another adult female placed just west of the Tomb 2 burial chamber had been partially removed during the original construction or a later remodeling of the tomb. Nearby was a secondary burial of an adult male whose disarticulated and incomplete skeleton had been carefully packed in a conical pit along with broken grave goods.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, our recent excavation points to considerable variability among excavated elite burials. Not only do Tombs 1 and 2 present a notable contrast in their funerary structures, but the associated simpler burials as groups also exhibit significant differences. For example, the use of cane-framed boxes lined with painted cloths as coffins or offering containers characterized those associated with Tomb 2. As our analysis advances, we may note other significant intra- and inter-group differences.

Our excavation also revealed an important spatial clustering of relatively small and simple, extended burials centered around a notably larger and more complex tomb dating to the early Middle Sicán around A.D. 1000. That the component burials date to different moments or manifest re-entries, alterations, and/or careful re-burial during the Middle Sicán suggest that they shared a persistent collective identity and memory, in which the principal personages of Tombs 1 and 2 each held an important place. Whether

there is any kinship basis for the individuals pertaining to each burial cluster will be tested by mtDNA and biodistance analyses that are already underway. Information from planned strontium and oxygen isotope analyses should help us elucidate the geographical origins of these individuals. The predominance of adult females among the excavated individuals whose sex can be determined, including those in Tomb 1, raises the distinct possibility that the western portion of the cemetery below and around the Huaca Loro temple mound was largely reserved for female elites and their close associates.

	First Tier: High Elite	Second Tier: Low Elite	Third Tier: Commoner	Fourth Tier: Captives, Servants?
Grave goods				
High-karat gold alloy objects	x			
Low-karat gold and/or silver (<i>tumbaga</i> & Cu-Ag) objects	x	x		
Copper-arsenic objects	x	x	x	
Cinnabar paint	x	x		
Ochre (hematite) paint			x	
Painted cloth	x	x		
Precious (emerald) stone objects	x			
Semi-precious stone objects	x	x		
Imported shells (<i>Spondylus princeps</i> , <i>Conus fergusonii</i>)	x			
Shell beads	x	x		
Double-spout bottles	x	x		
Single-spout bottles	x	x	x	
Utilitarian plain and/or paddle- decorated (<i>paletteada</i>) pottery			x	x

In terms of our working model of the Middle Sicán social hierarchy that is largely based on differential access to different metals among previously excavated burials, the principal personages of Tombs 1 and 2 pertain to high elite status, while those in the

adjacent graves are classified as predominantly low elite. A few individuals are assigned to commoner status. A relatively high incidence of copper-silver alloy objects was noted among both females and males of the inferred low elite status. Parenthetically, we have already shown that what James Brown (1995) refers to as the “representationist” vision of mortuary treatment is applicable to the Middle Sicán culture (Shimada et al. 2004).

Consideration of the new findings together with our previous knowledge brings up a number of interesting possibilities to consider here. The two burial clusters around Tombs 1 and 2 are situated at the very edge of the Huaca Loro temple mound. Portions are, in fact, under the basal terrace of the mound as were the East and West Tombs excavated on the north side of the temple mound in 1991-2 and 1995-6, respectively. Further, these tombs are equidistant (i.e., *circa* 65 m) from the center of the mound. Elsewhere, based on the results of a previous ground penetrating radar survey, we hypothesized the existence of the shafttomb of the “founder” of a Middle Sicán ruling lineage under the mound center. As seen in this drawing, the known looted shafttombs and inferred intact shafttombs detected by 2006 ground-penetrating radar survey are all situated close to the basal edge of the mound. We suggest that the cemetery at Huaca Loro had not only a “nested” organization beneath and in the immediate vicinity of the temple mound, but also was partitioned into various sectors. The zone at the mound base appears to have been formed by a series of major tombs each, in turn, closely surrounded by a group of smaller, simpler graves. In spite of damage by looters, in the immediate vicinity of the mouth of both the East and West tombs, we found at least two smaller burials. The horizontal partitioning of the burial ground may have been in part based on the sex of the deceased and perhaps the social role they played while alive. Generational differences among the interred do not appear to have been an important consideration.

Further clarification of the total configuration of the elite cemetery at Huaca Loro and the factors that underlay its internal organization are major questions to address in future.