

# **An Enduring Ritual Tradition at the Site of Sicán: From An Agency/Practice-Based “Bottom-Up” Perspective**

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## ABSTRACT

Many of the previous archaeological studies on prehistoric religion have tended to view it from a “top-down” perspective of the ruling populations and consider it to be a means for promoting the sociopolitical power and hegemony. In this paper, I would rather attempt to integrate the agency/practice-based “bottom-up” perspective of the ruled. With a primary emphasis on detailed contextual information, the historical developments of individual or group activities, as dialectic interplays between structure and practice, will be explored based on the data gained from the excavations during the 2006 and 2008 field seasons by the Proyecto Arqueológico Sicán (PAS) at the Site of Sicán, northern North Coast of Peru.

## Introduction

With various lines of evidence from the long-term interdisciplinary research efforts by Proyecto Arqueológico Sicán (PAS, hereafter) for the past 30 years, it has become clearer that the Middle Sicán society was governed by a theocratic institution comprised of multiple elite lineages in alliance or competition with each other. Their theocracy was based on the shared religious beliefs and rigid authorities centering on the site of Sicán on the northern North Coast of Peru until the burning and abandonment of the monumental structures around 1100 C.E. (Shimada 1981, 1990, 1995, 2006; 2004; Tschauer 2001). Central to the religious beliefs seems to have been the kingship-based (as opposed to kinship-based) ancestor veneration and commemoration (Shimada, et al. 2004). Nonetheless, the devastating looting activities of long standing in this area have made it difficult for archaeologists to fully capture the material manifestations of the protracted interactions between the dead and the living within deep stratigraphic sequences. New findings from our recent excavations of nearly intact cemetery ground and what we call Grand Plaza at the site of Sicán, however, give us an opportunity to trace out the historical trajectories of the religious practices in the long view and urge us to rethink those practices from an integrated perspective combining one from the ruling and the other from the ruled.

## Settings

The area that we call *Santuario Histórico Bosque de Pómac* (Pomac Forest Historical Sanctuary) today, located in the vast thorny forest of the middle La Leche Valley, seems to have been known for its sacred nature over nearly two thousand years since the Formative period (Shimada 1981). Particularly worth noting is the ritual interment of temples of different periods, starting from the Early Horizon Huaca La Lucia to the Late Horizon buried mound at Huaca Soledad (Shimada 1986). During the Middle Sicán period (900 – 1100 C.E.), it is likely that the area secured its role as a powerful ceremonial site, getting the measure of the famed religious centers of Pachacamac in the Lurín and Pacatnamú in the Jequetepeque Valleys. Through its religious prestige and economic prosperity, the Sicán established dominance over a 400-km stretch of the coast from the Chira Valley to the north to the Moche Valley to the south. The wide-spread representational iconographies centering on the “monotheistic” Sicán Lord/God image expressed in various media (e.g., metals, ceramics, textiles, murals, and wood) indicate the power and prestige of the Middle Sicán religion. By comparing it to the State of the Vatican City, Shimada (2006) recently characterizes the site of Sicán as the capital of a theocratic state.

Hitherto, it has been thought that the Middle Sicán religion came to an end due to the social unrest and disruption triggered by a 30-year-long devastating drought from ca. 1020 to 1050 C.E. (Shimada 1995). Correspondingly, the Sicán Lord/God image disappeared from ceramic vessels, which demarcates the end of the Middle Sicán period. Many of the monumental mounds in the core area of the capital that no longer acquired centripetal force were set on fire and eventually

abandoned around 1100 C.E. It is also reported that sometime between 1050 and 1100 C.E., relatively soon after the burning of mounds, a legendarily massive, so-called *Naymlap* flood took place (Shimada 1990).

Two major excavations of deep shafttombs at the base of Huaca Loro, one of a dozen monumental, multi-level platform mounds at the site (East Tomb in 1991-2 and West Tomb in 1995-6) yielded substantial amount of contextual data that allowed for building and testing a series of hypotheses. Based on the multiple lines of evidence gained from interdisciplinary analyses, Shimada and his colleagues (2004) cogently assert that a series of truncated pyramidal mounds should have been the physical focus of ancestor veneration and commemoration by an elite lineage (See Farnum 2002; Montenegro Cabrejo 1998; Montenegro and Shimada 1998).

Quite unfortunately, however, the stratigraphic sequences above the excavated shafttombs, which are inferred to have contained post-interment ritual contexts and critical for the arguments of commemoration ritual, had been heavily bulldozed by modern-day looters, and PAS had missed the opportunity to search into those ritual practices archaeologically until recently. New findings from the two excavations at the site of Sicán in 2006 and 2008 now enable us to explore the nature of the protracted dead-living interactions through the study of ritual practices.

As we pointed out at this meeting two years ago (Shimada, et al. 2007), “[m]any pre- and post-interment activities can and do occur away from the actual burial location, and urge sampling of broader areas.” In other words, we have to broaden our perspective not only vertically but also horizontally and cover a wide range of area. Consequently, in our excavations in 2006 and 2008, we focused attention on two different ritual contexts at the site (Figure 1): (1) a long sequence of ritual activities unveiled by test excavation in 1997 above a nearly intact Middle Sicán burial ground under and at the west base of Huaca Loro (PAS-HL’06-T1-3); and (2) the other on an inferred ritual ground located some 50 m east of Huaca Loro near the west edge of the Grand Plaza, which is circumscribed by the four major monumental structures: Huaca Loro to the west, Huaca Colorada to the north, Huaca Las Ventanas to the east, and Huaca La Merced to the southwest (PAS-HL’08-Area 3). The major aims of my study are: (1) to thread out the trajectory of the protracted interactions between the dead and the living; (2) to detect, if any, the changes in nature, scale, and pattern of the interactions through time; and (3) to explore the nature of the ritual practices at different phases as well as that of the ancestor veneration cult during the Middle Sicán period.

## **Preliminary Results**

The excavation in 2006 revealed that above the Middle Sicán burial ground were 14 occupational layers which stretch over 500 years into the Late Horizon. The occupational layers were accompanied by a whole variety of material signs of ritual and feasting activities in the form of burnt areas, ash concentrations, fire pits, buried ollas, adobe-lined hearths, and so forth (Figure 2). The burning activities, in particular, were extensively found throughout the Huaca Loro area and well into the Grand Plaza. Although the further characterizations of these practices require a series of artifactual and chemical analyses, these evidences clearly indicate that groups of people gathered around Huaca Loro, conducted rituals, and held feastings once in a while even after the demise of the Middle Sicán culture. These post-interment ritual practices were recovered right above the Middle Sicán burial ground and thus considered to represent the veneration and commemoration for the Sicán ancestors in later periods. Regardless of who carried out or participated in the rituals, the Middle Sicán religion based on ancestor veneration cult may not have necessarily faced its end, but rather maintained its influence to some extent over the people who gathered around the pyramidal mound after the burning and abandonment of it. In spite of the extent and intensity of the Chimu occupation of the former Sicán heartland, it is likely that the Chimu overlord allowed the persistence of Sicán ritual customs.

Interestingly, furthermore, we also documented that these occupational layers of ritual practices were sandwiched between thick fluvial depositions of sand and clay most probably due to heavy rains and subsequent floods (Figure 3). This may suggest an association of the rituals and feastings with water. In any scenario, cumulative water-related natural calamities, both scarce and overabundant, such as long-lasting droughts, heavy rains, and floods seem to have had a great impact on both the people of the Middle Sicán society and the later populations.

In the 2008 excavation, one of the excavation units, PAS-HL'08-Area 3, was set up in the west marginal zone of the Grand Plaza that borders the Basal Terrace of the Huaca Loro temple mound (some 50 m east from the mound). It was also placed to adjoin the southern edge of an L-shaped trench of the PAS 1985 excavation that exposed a sherd-lined and covered "canal." Slightly veering off from the N-S axis, the unit was aligned with this canal so that we could trace its possible continuation to the south.

The stratigraphy of the Area 3 consists of: (1) two thick relatively recent fluvial deposits of sand and clay; (2) eight Occupational Surfaces; and (3) two clay floors. On the eight occupational surfaces, we observed a series of burnt areas very similar to those previously documented in our 2006 excavation (Figure 4). The alternate sequence of these occupational surfaces and thick fluvial layers was also clearly observed.

As was expected, the excavation recovered the southward continuation of the inferred canal (Canal 1) and further revealed that it diverged into another channel to the west (Canal 2), in other words, towards the Huaca Loro temple mound (Figure 5). Although the final judgment of what these ditches were actually awaits some chemical analysis of soil samples that we collected from the inferred base, judging from the clay mortar plastered on the interior walls of the ditch and the sandy fill containing cinnabar bits as well as ceramic sherds and food refuses, it was temporarily inferred that they were indeed ritual canals.

Some elevation measurements we took on the cut edges and the bottom surfaces of the inferred canals were not always unidirectionally gradual; however, overall, the west and north sides were higher than the east and south sides. This means that the liquid in the canals should have flowed from the Huacas towards the La Leche River. These directions are totally opposite from the direction expected for the ordinary canals. In other words, in the ordinarily functioning canals, the water should flow from the river to the supplying areas. From this fact, it seems to be quite difficult to infer that they functioned as a regular canal supplying water and thus more reasonable to assume a ritual use. I suspect that they rather functioned as a ritual canal to extract some supernatural power or symbolic "resources" from the sacred temple mounds and drained them to the ephemeral or dried-up river.

A supporting evidence for this hypothesis was gained from another excavation unit of the PAS 2008 season, HL'08-Area1. The tomb excavation around the northwest corner of the Huaca Loro temple mound recovered a series of vessel offerings placed along the north edge of the eroded temple (Figure 6). These cantaros were carefully placed at the distal ends of gutters made by the erosion, through which the drained rainwater should have cascaded down, so that they could catch the water. The placement of these cantaros seems to fit my interpretation for the inferred ritual canals on the east side of the temple mound. The water seems to have been viewed as a life force or "semen" to fertilize the earth, coming off the sacred mound. Due to its physical appearance through the erosional process, the mound may have functioned as an index or a non-human agent in Alfred Gell's (1998) sense to invoke such a religious belief during the Middle Sicán period and kept leading people to the ritual practices that we documented.

## **Discussions and Conclusion**

As summarized above, our excavations in 2006 and 2008 revealed: (1) the existence of an enduring ritual tradition after the burning of the monumental architecture and subsequent

abandonment of the site; and (2) the close association of those ritual practices with water-related events. Ancestor veneration cult has often times been considered by politico-economic reasoning as being a means for the descendants to claim for the rights for valuable resources (e.g., Saxe/Goldstein Hypotheses; also see McAnany 1995; Morris 1991). The continuity of occupation and residency was the ground of one's claims. Contrarily, it is known that the site of Sicán had only small permanent elite residents and that the Middle Sicán ancestor veneration rituals were meant to revere the elite lineages which formed only a small part of the whole society. Those ritual practices of essentially exclusive nature seem to discord from the fact that people continued to gather around the monumental mounds and conducted rituals and feasting after the elites left the site around 1100 C.E. What was the centripetal force for those people, most probably non-elite mass?

Traditionally in anthropological studies, religion and ritual have been viewed from a "top-down" perspective of the ruling populations and considered to be a means for promoting the sociopolitical power and hegemony (Bloch 1989; Conrad and Demarest 1992; DeMarrais, et al. 1996; Emerson, et al. 2008; Fox 1996; Kertzer 1988, 1991; Laneri 2008). Some uncritically assumed that in an ancient state the cognitive code and ritual experience, oftentimes in the form of state religion, functions as a prime mover for hierarchical integration of members and groups of society and serves to legitimate power monopoly and social inequality in the hierarchy by confirming the divine affiliation of those at the top (Blanton, et al. 1996; Childe 1946; Flannery 1972; Friedmann and Rowlands 1978; Godelier 1978; Lowie 1967; Mumford 1961; Rappaport 1971; Swenson 2003; Turner 1941; Wheatley 1971; White 1959; Wolf 1982). Although these characterizations may partially be the case as one aspect of an organized religion, their arguments are totally ensnared in one-sided view. They take it for granted that only omnipotent godly and heroic (usually male) leaders were credited with the social formation and simply ignore the roles of other non-elite social agents such as "slaves and soldiers, priests and priestesses, peasants and prostitutes, merchants and craftsmen" (Yoffee 2005:2).

On the contrary, I would rather attempt to integrate the agency/practice-based "bottom-up" perspective of the ruled (See Pauketat 2000). Not only the elites who revered their own biological ancestors, but also common people will be viewed as active agents who supported the Middle Sicán ancestor cult. The ongoing analysis of miniature funerary vessels (a.k.a. *crisoles*) by Gabriela Cervantes, along with Dr. Ursel Wagner's Mössbauer spectroscopic analysis of their paste and Dr. Linda Perry's residue analysis, all suggests that they were made and/or brought by many people who participated in the funerals – in other words, elites and non-elites who pertained to the same social and/or ethnic groups. Drawing upon the insights from Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, furthermore, I will mindfully avoid falling into the traditional dichotomy of society and individual or of structure and agency. I would rather embrace them in a single conception and treat them in the same archaeological contexts of social practices. History will be viewed as being structured by the interrelationships between given conditions (e.g., material conditions, conventions, values, systemic organization, and the subjective understandings, desires, motivations of agency, and its consequences) (Barrett 2001). With a primary emphasis on these interrelationships, the possibly unique, historical trajectories of ritual practices should be explored based on the firsthand observations of material palimpsests that human practices created and left in the ground. The methodological aspect of this study will be discussed more in detail in the upcoming SAA meeting at Atlanta, GA.

As for the answer to the question above, although quite provisional, I suspect that the mortuary practices and attendant rituals around the temple mound and in the Grand Plaza were associated with the intercession for water. The ancestors were not only believed to be the earthly alter ego of the Sicán God, but also functioned as the mediator beseeching the god to restore the natural order on behalf of the descents and their people during the large-scale devastation out of human control (e.g., natural disasters such as drought and flood).

## Figures

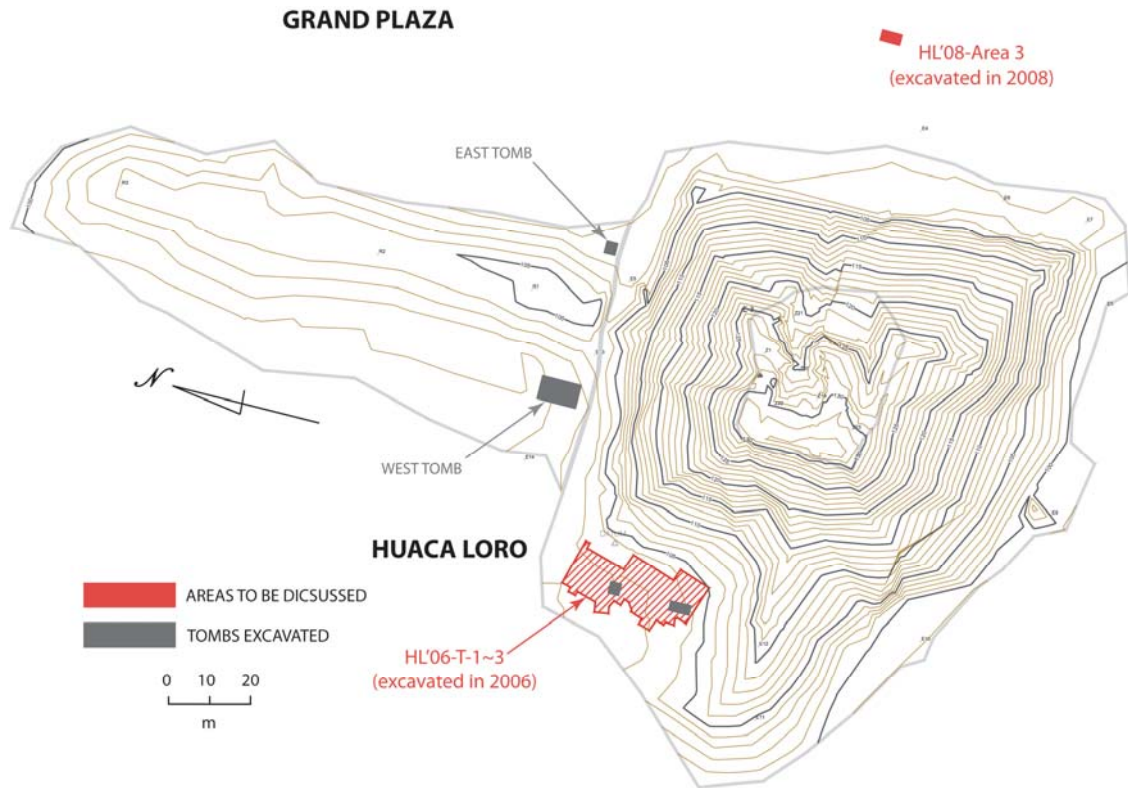


Figure 1: The two excavated areas in 2006 (HL'06 Trenches 1-3) and 2008 (HL'08 Area 3).



Figure 2: Various features recovered on the Occupational Surface 6 in the PAS-HL'06 Trench 1.





**Figure 3: Thick fluvial depositions sandwiching the occupational surfaces in the PAS-HL'06 Trenches.**



**Figure 4: A burnt area recovered on the occupational Surface 5 in the PAS-HL'08 Area 3.**







**Figure 6: Vessel offerings placed at the distal ends of gutters made by the erosion along the north edge of the eroded Huaca Loro temple mound. Photo by Izumi Shimada.**

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