

[\(Click to 2\)](#) Introduction

Independent of conventional iconographic interpretations of the Sicán Deity/Lord [\(Click to 3\)](#) as the progenitor or the founder of a legendary dynasty, research by the Sicán Archaeological Project has revealed that ancestor veneration and commemoration were central to Sicán religious belief. [\(Click to 4\)](#) Based on multiple lines of evidence from interdisciplinary analyses of two major elite shafttombs at the north base of the Huaca Loro temple mound, Shimada and his colleagues cogently assert [\(Click to 5\)](#) that some of the principal mounds at the site of Sicán were the physical foci of ancestor veneration by different elite lineages. [\(Click to 6\)](#) These lines of fine-grained contextual evidence strongly counter James Whitley's argument that many archaeologists tend to focus solely on burial locations and give short shrift to potentially much more complicated issues by simply lumping them together under the heading of "ancestor cults."

[\(Click to 7\)](#) As illuminated by the latest thematic trend in Andean mortuary archaeology, to explore the nature of ancestor veneration and commemoration, it is essential to study the material manifestations of protracted interactions between the dead and the living and to consider a broader range of contexts where related rituals may have taken place. [\(Click\)](#) Consequently, our excavations in 2006 and 2008 were aimed at delineating the trajectory of the protracted interactions by means of a longer and wider perspective and we focused attention on two different ritual contexts at the site: [\(Click to 8\)](#) (1) the locus 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; and [\(Click to 9\)](#) (2) an inferred ritual ground located some 50 m east of Huaca Loro near the west edge of the Great Plaza, which is circumscribed by the four major monumental structures. In this paper, with reference to

new findings from these excavations, [\(Click to 10\)](#) I focus on questions of how to approach a study of this posited Sicán ancestor cult, especially its material correlates. I conclude with a preliminary vision of the nature of the Sicán ancestor cult.

[\(Click to 11\)](#) **Reinstatement of Field Archaeology**

Aside from theoretical and methodological advancements in mortuary archaeology since the mid-80s, traditional archaeological studies of prehispanic religion and ritual in the Andes seem to have largely downplayed the potential of field archaeology. [\(Click to 12\)](#) The architectural approach inherently oversimplifies a broad array of complex ritual traditions into a single category of behavior, [\(Click to 13\)](#) while ethnohistorical analogy “may cause the archaeologist to risk assuming the very thing he should be trying to find out” and, in the process, overlooking the existence of religious practices unique in the prehistoric past. Although providing a series of important insights and clues to explore the religious beliefs and cosmology of the prehispanic Andean people, [\(Click to 14\)](#) various interpretations and hypotheses derived from the iconographic approach are essentially subjective outlooks hard to prove by archaeological means that must remain propositions. Ritual practices took place not on the two-dimensional surfaces of ceremonial vessels, but in three-dimensional archaeological space imbued with an almost infinite amount of potential data. With this in mind, my top priority was on firsthand observation of microcontexts of archaeological materials in the field from a behavioral perspective. I am not pursuing laws of human behavior but history structured by the interrelationships among such factors as human and non-human agencies and their consequences [\(Click to 15\)](#).

New Findings from 2006 and 2008 Field Seasons

PAS 2006: Excavation of the West Cemetery

The excavation in 2006 revealed that the excavated portion of the Middle Sicán burial ground, designated the West Cemetery ([Click to 16](#)), consisted of Tombs 1 and 2, and other smaller and simpler funerary structures. Although most of the burials seem to have been arranged later around the two tombs, ([Click](#)) two of the later burials dating to early and late Middle Sicán, respectively, ([Click to 17](#)) had been disturbed by the later sequential depositions of two sacrificed individuals, one of whom had been decapitated.

Above this Middle Sicán burial ground ([Click to 18](#)) were a minimum of 14 occupational surfaces together spanning over 500 years – well into the Late Horizon. Each revealed evidence of ritual offerings and feasting activities ([Click to 19](#)) such as burnt surfaces, burnt items (e.g., maize and textile), ash concentrations, fire pits, buried ollas, adobe-lined hearths, ([Click to 20](#)) disarticulated animal bones, and so forth. The burning activities, ([Click to 21](#)) in particular, were extensively found throughout the Huaca Loro area. ([Click to 22](#)) These occupational surfaces of burning activities were sandwiched between thick fluvial deposits of sand and clay most probably due to heavy rains and subsequent floods. ([Click to 23](#)) A close look at each burning activity revealed that the activities took place during and/or shortly after fluvial events before the ground surface was dry, as was the case with the sacrificial rituals documented during the Late Moche at Plaza 3A, Huaca de la Luna. ([Click to 24](#)) In some cases, *poña*, the local term for *algarrobo* tree litter, was found partially embedded in fine silt or clayish surfaces, indicating that they had been still moist and soft.

[\(Click to 25\)](#) *PAS 2008: Excavation of Great Plaza*

During the excavation in 2008, we made three major findings in the Great Plaza. [\(Click to 26\)](#) First, we documented a 3-by-3 m adobe-lined hearth that is inferred from ceramic style and stratigraphic position to have pertained to the middle Middle Sicán period. [\(Click to 27\)](#) In and around the hearth we found a thick ashy soil deposition containing a whole variety of food remains, fragmented serving and cooking vessels, [\(Click to 28\)](#) exotic items (e.g., cinnabar bits and a *Conus fergusonii*), craft production tools (e.g., spindle whirls and sewing needles), and some human bones. The project excavated another area of the plaza in 1990 and also found a similar large-scale adobe-lined hearth associated with llama bones, some of which were articulated. [\(Click to 29\)](#) The Great Plaza seems to have been dotted with extraordinarily large hearths and is posited to have prepared substantial amounts of food at a time. The high frequency of llama bones – other than the skull and limbs usually devoted to burial offerings – seems to indicate that the rest of the body was processed for consumption.

The diversity of accompanying artifacts found in and around the hearth may be a tell-tale sign for simultaneous, multiple activities occurring in the plaza such as cooking, rituals involving exhumed body parts or preparing of the funerary bundles, and craft production [\(Click to 30\)](#). In regard to the last, a Middle Sicán metalworking area was, indeed, found associated with [\(Click to 31\)](#) scraps of gold sheets, chisels, tuyere fragments, and slag lumps in another excavation unit of the 2008 field season.

Second, [\(Click to 32\)](#) we documented an inferred ritual canal one level above the occupational surface associated with the aforementioned cooking hearth. Cutting through the adobe platform associated with the hearth, it was dug in a T-shape [\(Click\)](#) with the

main channel running south to north and a smaller, shallower channel diverging towards the west. (Click) Adobe bricks lined the southern part of the main canal and clay mortar plastered all of the interior walls.

Interestingly, some elevation measurements we took at the cut edges and inferred base of the canal led us to conclude that (Click) the liquid in the canal would have flowed from the Huacas towards the La Leche River. This direction, totally opposite from that expected for ordinary canals, together with scattered cinnabar bits contained in the sandy fill suggest a more ritual use of this construction. Could this canal have been a response to the long drought in the early 11th century drought, with the intent to transfer supernatural power or symbolic “resources” from the sacred temple mounds (Click to 33) to the ephemeral or dried-up river?

Supporting evidence for this very tentative hypothesis was gained from another excavation unit of the 2008 season. (Click to 34) The tomb excavation around the northwest corner of Huaca Loro recovered a series of vessel offerings placed along the north edge of the eroded temple. (Click to 35) These *cantaros* were carefully placed at the distal termini of natural gutters formed by rainwater that cascaded down the steep slopes of the Huaca Loro mound. The flow of liquid coming from the Huacas seems to have had a strong symbolic meaning.

(Click to 36) Third, on five occupational surfaces above the inferred ritual canal, we found a series of burning activities quite similar to those documented in 2006 in the West Cemetery. The surfaces were simply burnt using *poña* and were associated with very few cultural remains. No meaningful pattern for the distribution, frequency, and intensity of those burning activities has been recognized so far.

Discussion

(Click to 37) During the past two field seasons, the SAP sampled extensive, deep areas that are associated with burials and with the intent of exploring the nature of the Sicán ancestor cult from a behavioral perspective as opposed to the conventional approaches relying on ethnohistory and iconography. (Click to 38) As a result, we were able to document (Click) not only the variability in funerary and burial practices during the Middle Sicán period, (Click) but also multiple functions of the adjacent plaza such as feasting, craft production, handling and manipulation of dead body parts, (Click) and subsequent ritual activities that lasted over 500 years superpositioned above the Middle Sicán cemetery in close association with fluvial events. Described below are some of my preliminary interpretations of these findings at this point in time.

(Click to 39) First, the persistent ritual use of the same location is only one criterion for identifying ancestor veneration and commemoration. The inference awaits independent lines of evidence. In this regard, (Click) various activities in the Great Plaza support an ancestor cult during the middle Middle Sicán. Further, in the plaza, within the ashy soil deposits immediately east of the cooking hearth, (Click to 40) we recovered a ceramic Sicán Lord icon most likely removed from a face-neck jar. The face which had been cut out and neatly trimmed may have functioned as a mnemonic device that revived memories of a certain individual or group of Sicán elite and may have been carried to display his or her social/religious identity.

(Click to 41) Second, it is likely that the Sicán ancestor cult lost its centripetal force around the time the masses lost their trust in the Sicán Deity due to the social unrest and disruption triggered by a 30-year-long devastating drought from ca. 1020 to 1050 C.E. The

drastic change in the use of plaza area, most clearly indicated by the disappearance of commemorative feasts and the “intrusive” construction of ritual canals, seems to suggest the termination of the cult and correspond to the burning and abandonment of monumental structures at the site. The human sacrifices made in the West Cemetery and construction of the ritual canal in the Great Plaza may have been last-gasp ritual attempts to bring to an end a devastating natural calamity and restore order. Stratigraphically speaking, all these events took place before the so-called *Naymlap* flood sometime between 1050 and 1100 C.E. The temporal linkages between these events are yet to be further established by radiocarbon dating.

After the Sicán ancestor cult came to an end, we see behavior suggesting a different kind of religious belief. No material indications suggestive of Middle Sicán ancestors were found on the later burnt occupational surfaces. Further, the burning activities occurred not only above the Middle Sicán cemetery, but well into the Great Plaza. As seen in much stronger association between ritual practices and fluvial events, (Click) the burning activities and attendant rituals and feastings are more likely to have been aimed at maintaining natural order and gaining agricultural success as argued by Shimada and Samillán in this symposium. These may have coexisted with or even preceded the earlier Sicán ancestor cult. I hypothesize that these post-interment rituals relate to a concern over water and fertility, which may indirectly relate to “ancestors” as mediating agents between the celestial force and the living.

(Click to 42) **Conclusion**

One of the remarkable characteristics of the Sicán theocratic state is its multiplicity. (Click) It encompassed cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, as well as social and cultural

legacies. From this standpoint, we may have to even consider the possibility that the ancestor cult was exclusive to the Sicán elite and never penetrated into those of different ethnicity and religious orientation. We can further develop the study of this multifaceted Sicán religion by inquiring who got involved in it and what they did in the ritual practices in what contexts. This is incomplete without the reinstatement of field archaeology ([Click to 43](#)).