

**Fire, Water, *Huaca* and Offerings:
Rituals of Regeneration and Ancestor Veneration in the Sicán Culture**

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Abstract

The Cupisnique practice of setting intentional fires at the time of interment continued into the later Sicán and post-Sicán periods in the Lambayeque region of the north coast. We documented numerous episodes (1000-1533 CE) of extensive but ephemeral fire setting immediately following the deposition of each new alluvial layer around the Huaca Loro temple mound. Offerings of ceramics, ingots, textiles and even a whole puma were placed where water would have cascaded down the temple mound. We argue that these activities expressed ancestor veneration and interrelated concepts of transformation and regeneration.

In this paper (Ppt-1) we argue that two primordial elements of nature - fire and water - together with massive adobe-and-fill mounds commonly called *huacas*, and sacrificial offerings constituted the principal components of the Sicán ancestor cult on the northern north coast of Peru. In support of this interpretation, we present various lines of evidence documented by our long-term investigations at the Sicán capital (Ppt-2) in what is known today as the Poma Forest National Historical Sanctuary in the mid-La Leche Valley.

Fire (Ppt-3) played a critical role in prehispanic Andean religious rituals at least from the Late Preceramic Period, ca. 3000-1500 BCE. For example, the Altar of the Sacred Fire within the Amphitheater Temple at Caral (Ppt-4) on the north-central coast of Peru had a centrally placed, stone-lined hearth with subfloor ventilation ducts (Shady 200_:141). Excavated contemporaneous mound-top ritual spaces in the Casma and other nearby valleys had similar centrally placed hearths attesting to the importance of fire for rituals conducted in enclosed temples (Vega-Centeno 200_). Enclosed temples of the Mito Religious Tradition that covered much of the northern and central highlands of Peru also featured the ventilated central hearths (Bonnier 1997).

Within our own study area, the Early Horizon Temple of the Columns at Huaca Lucía (Ppt-5) did not have a central hearth but, rather, a circular, intensely burnt area near the center of its beautifully maintained floor (Shimada et al. 1982). When the temple was later carefully and thoroughly interred with up to 8 m of pure clean sand and sealed by a clay layer, one of the final acts was setting a series of regularly placed intense bonfires (Ppt-6) atop the entombed temple

(Shimada 1985). This ritual act finds its parallel in the practice of setting a small fire next to the deceased among many Cupisnique burials (Ppt-7) of the late second and early first millennia BCE in the same region.

Fire chemically and physically transforms material items. In the cases we just described, while there may have been considerable variation in terms of the number of people who participated in or had visual access to rituals, in all cases, fire was employed not for the destructive purpose of obliterating temples or corpses, but toward the creative end of generating heat, light, and smoke that signaled the sacred entity at hand transforming from one state to another.

For a period spanning ca. 1000 to 1500 CE, in our study area, we documented numerous cases of intentional fires set atop sealed burials that support the preceding view. For example, a layer of carbonized twigs and ash was found atop five superimposed burials placed in sterile sand at the east base of the central ramp of the Huaca Las Ventanas temple mound dating to ca. 1000 CE (Ppt-8). First, each burial was placed perpendicular and atop the preceding within a short span of time in a planned manner. Then, the whole area was covered with *poña*, burned, and finally was buried by the thick fill of the ramp. *Poña* (Ppt-9) is a local term for fallen dry leaves and twigs that accumulate at the bases of *algarrobo* trees (*Prosopis pallida*) that abound at the site.

Similar, one-time fires of greater intensity and extent were documented at Huaca Lercanlech (aka Rodillona; Ppt-10), the largest truncated pyramidal temple mound at Sicán measuring 100 by 100 m at the base and standing close to 40 m in height. Two trenches (2x3m, 5x5m) dug to test ground-penetrating radar

(GPR) detection of two inferred deep shaft-tombs near the southeastern corner of the mound each revealed a rectangular sunken area. Each area was covered with a thick layer of whitish ash, which in turn overlay an intensely fire-reddened and hardened clay layer ca. 1.5 to 2.0 m below surface (Ppt-11). The fired clay layers, we believe, sealed the mouths of inferred shaft-tombs. In fact, the larger trench exposed a tightly flexed individual at the northeast corner of the sunken area who appeared to have been buried, probably as a sacrifice, at the time the inferred shaft-tomb was sealed. These shaft-tombs have not yet been excavated.

The same association of a ritual fire, sacrificial activities, and the closure of a tomb was documented during the excavation of Tomb 1 at the West Cemetery of the major truncated pyramidal temple mound called Huaca Loro (Ppt-13). This intact shaft-tomb (measuring 3.5 by 3.3 m and 5 m in depth) was dedicated to the interment of an adult female elite in a seated, cross-legged position and her adult female companion. The closure of her tomb was marked by the setting of a small fire and placement of an infant burial, both atop the sealed shaft mouth, and sacrifice of at least two adult individuals, one with severed head interred in an adjacent area (Ppt-14).

The excavation in the West Cemetery suggests that setting of a fire not only marked a major transition in human life, but also embraced the notion of renewal of life in general. We documented 20 intermittent fires over a span of 400 years after the regular use of the Huaca Loro ended around 1100 CE. accompanied by sacrificial acts and took place immediately after a major alluvial event.

Around 1050-1100 C.E., a severe flood associated with an El Niño event of historic proportions, commonly called "Naymlap's Flood," beset the capital of Sicán. Immediately thereafter, all major monuments at the capital were torched and largely abandoned. Thoroughly burnt remains of the monumental plastered columns that once supported solid roofs littered the temple floors atop of these mounds (Ppt-15). Surface vitrification and the depth of discoloration indicate that a large quantity of fuel was used to intensely burn some structures.

While it is tempting to interpret this conflagration as a manifestation of violent attack on the extant Middle Sicán leadership and associated religious dogma, the long-term, regional perspective on fire usage both preceding and following this event suggests an alternative view; that it was instead a ritual that marked the end of active use life of the sacred architecture and the transition to a new afterlife status or role, paralleling the Robert Hertzian notion of transition from the liminal to post-liminal phase. In essence we are speaking of the post-mortem social life of sacred architecture. We argue that the architecture was conceived and treated like sacred personages whose images decorated the temples at its top. The transition brought with it a new relationship between the living on one hand, and the dead and the transformed temples, on the other.

These temples were decorated with murals of a series of front-faced, standing personages with supernatural attributes and wearing varied ceremonial garbs. Our long-term excavations of tombs around and under the Huaca Loro mound, ongoing excavations at the nearby Huaca Las Ventanas mound by a team from the Sicán National Museum, the aforementioned finding of intact tombs

at Huaca Lercanlech, and other lines of evidence all suggest that each of these temple mounds denoted the formal, planned burial ground of a distinct elite lineage. Thus, we believe the images of the personages enshrined in the temples atop these mounds represented the deceased elite lineage members who were not only buried beneath, but were conceived as having transformed into mythical ancestors.

The new relationship between the living and the dead mentioned above is evident in the 20 fires set atop a freshly laid alluvial deposit - literally while the soil was still damp as attested to by footprints we found. Examination of the burnt materials indicates the fuel used for these fires was predominantly *poña*. The intensity of the fires varied but the reddish heat-discolored surfaces were traced over much of the areas surrounding the base of the Huaca Loro mound and 50 m eastward into the adjacent Great Plaza. Associated ceramics suggest these fires span a time period from Middle Sicán, ca. A.D. 1000, to Chimú-Inka, ca. A.D. 1460-1532.

Scattered across the extensive burnt surface around the Huaca Loro mound were a number of firepits and buried *ollas* and jars in a manner of offerings. Many of these firepits contained carefully selected *algarrobo* fruit (sweet bean pods), maize kernels and plant parts and, in a few cases, burnt cloth. It is notable that these firepits and buried vessels at various depths were spatially clustered around the tops of the two largest tombs we excavated in the West Cemetery, Tombs 1 and 2, suggesting an important and persistent symbolic connection. Near the SE corner of our excavation area near Tomb 2,

ca. one meter below modern surface and directly associated with a burnt surface, we recovered an almost complete but disarticulated puma (*Felis concolor* Fig. 27) skeleton including its skull. A few of its bones had been partially burnt. The specifics of what was done with the animal remains unclear; however, the rare presence of puma in archaeological context in general attests to the special significance of fire rituals.

A critical clue to the significance of these fires is a string of at least three ceramic vessels that were carefully buried in the burnt surface at the mouth of a small erosional gully near the base of the steep north face of the Huaca Loro mound where water from rare rains would have cascaded down. Their unique placement suggests a symbolic appreciation of life-giving water. It is apparent that the mound in spite of its burnt and eroded state retained its sacred significance.

Sicán art in fact is replete with symbolism of water and life cycle. Notable in this regard are toads and *Spondylus princeps*, and, to a lesser degree, bees, iguanas (identified by serrated backs), parrots and cicadas. These are creatures that often appear in mass and rather abruptly with the warming of the coast and arrival of water, particularly runoff from annual rainfall in the adjacent highlands and occasional El Niño rains on the coast, typically in December.

In conclusion, we documented key religious rituals and concerns of the Sicán and their descendants. We posit that the mounds were perceived to embody both the souls and physical remains of venerated ancestors and were treated as proxies of sacred mountains that provided life-giving water to the

coast. The persistent and widespread tradition of ritual fires associated with the human interment and architectural abandonment marked the end of one life and the beginning of a new life and served as a highly visual symbol or a plea for continuance of the life cycle. While sacrifices and blood offerings have received much attention in discussions of Sicán and other prehispanic religions, the present study points to the integral importance of ritual fire and association transformational process and ancestor veneration in their conception of renewal of agricultural and life cycles.