

## ANNUAL REPORT: CHINCHA (PERU) 2013 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students examine an offering recovered from Cerro de Gentil

### GENERAL

The Programa Arqueológico de Chincha hosted its second IFR field school between June 30<sup>th</sup> and August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013. The project and field school focus on the pre-Columbian history of Peru's Chincha Valley, a wide alluvial drainage that cross-cuts the northern reaches of the arid Atacama Desert. The valley has long been a locus of human occupation and activity, with known sites and settlements stretching from the first millennium BCE through the Spanish conquest, including Paracas, Wari, Chincha and Inka elements. Our current investigations focus on the Paracas occupation of the middle valley – an area some 20 km from the sea where the alluvial plain meets the Andean foothills. Chincha field school students took part in excavations at the Paracas platform mound of Cerro de Gentil, regional level survey in the middle valley, and laboratory analysis of excavation materials and survey collections.

### PEDAGOGY

Students arrived at the Lima airport in the early morning hours of June 30<sup>th</sup>, and accompanied by staff members began the long journey south to the city of Chincha Alta. During this initial trip, students were first exposed to the stark landscape of the Peruvian coast and were introduced to basic Andean geography, ecology, and environment – an ongoing topic of discussion throughout the field season. Upon arrival in Chincha Alta, students were introduced to modern daily life on the south coast – food, culture, market etiquette, and local transportation systems. Before beginning field work, students spent two days visiting important sites in the middle valley area – Chococota, Pampa de Gentil, and others – before visiting Cerro de

Gentil, the project focus site. Students had the opportunity to observe the ongoing excavations at Gentil, speak with and observe excavators, and receive in-field lectures on excavation methods, provenance systems, and the process of removing excavated materials to the laboratory, before diving into excavation themselves.

During the second part of the season, students joined the survey team in the narrow valley neck above El Carmen. Students faced the steep valley landscape head on, becoming proficient at identifying and recording archaeological sites; discerning cultural affiliation of those sites based on surface collections and architecture; and learning the project's GIS data collection and management system. Students took turns photographing site features, aiding with controlled collection of surface ceramics and other recovered materials, handling hard copy information recording, and using a GIS based system to record high resolution data within the survey area. They were also exposed to the tough physical reality of archaeological survey – long days of walking on steep and uneven terrain, hauling necessary gear, food and water for long stretches, and working with a highly specialized team.

Our crew shared a large field house in Chincha Alta, close to the central Plaza de Armas. Each day began at 6:30 AM, when staff and students used a local micro bus (*combi*) for transport to the small town of El Carmen, the base camp near the middle valley neck. Time spent in El Carmen also provided the opportunity to experience its unique modern approach to music and dance, including *cajon* playing (a wooden drumming box) by world renowned Peruvian musicians.

The Programa Arqueologico Chincha emphasizes a data driven approach to archaeological practice and material culture. Students were encouraged to suggest different analytical approaches based on their own interpretations of finds and the potential information that might be recovered from a given assemblage or context. We strive to provide students with independent research projects that suit their interests.

Teams returned to Chincha Alta for dinner and evening lectures. Topics included chemical analysis of ceramic resins and paints, mortuary monumentality, professional photography, and the history of Andean empires. A variety of staff and visiting professionals provided lectures in a loose seminar fashion that encouraged brainstorming and critical interpretation of theoretical, methodological, and practical issues.

## **EXCAVATION**

Excavations in 2013 focused on the site of Cerro del Gentil (PV57-59). The site is a large, three-tiered adobe platform mound that was constructed in the Paracas architectural tradition during the Early Horizon Period (approximately 500 to 100 BCE). We opened a 10 x 10 meter exposure on the second highest tier of the mound, revealing a sunken court with plastered walls and numerous internal reconstruction episodes. The majority of our efforts during excavation involved reconstituting the construction sequence of the platform and much of its semi-subterranean architecture. Teams spent much time carefully exposing plastered walls and floors – a delicate process given what appear to be at least half a dozen architectural modifications over the structure's lifetime, a high density of ritual offerings, and the mound's later use as a mortuary context.

We daily encountered ritual offerings as well as burials in the platform exposure. The discovery of large storage ollas full of post-fire painted polychrome pottery, alongside maize cobs and polychrome basketry, supports our hypothesis that the mound's major period of construction and use dates to the Paracas occupation of the Peruvian south coast. The quality of the recovered offerings, the sunken court, the labor that would have been necessary to construct the edifice, and the site's positioning within the early Chincha settlement system suggests that the mound served a communal and ceremonial function – perhaps related to early ritualized economies on the south coast.

We also recovered a number of burials from excavations at Gentil. Some may be contemporary with mound's original use, based on associated with known artifact styles and the presence of trephinated skulls.

Others are likely more recent, based on an analysis of textiles recovered from a small bundle containing a single cranium. Site stratigraphy is extraordinarily complex – intrusive burials cut through earlier layers, and subsequent looting has apparently comingled human remains from disjunctive time periods. We continue to untangle this conundrum through careful spatial analysis, and will support our interpretations with several dozen radiocarbon dates in the near future.

## **SURVEY**

In 2013 we carried out an initial season of full-coverage survey in the middle and upper valley, with the goal of filling vital gaps in regional settlement patterns studies, particularly in areas of articulation between the coastal lower valley and the western slopes of the Andes. The survey team identified nearly 80 sites ranging from the coastal Late Formative period through the period of Inka influence on the south coast, and including mortuary features, defensive hilltop redoubts, agricultural and domestic terraces, canals, roadways, and single occupation events.

We identified several dozen cemeteries dating to the local Chincha polity (1300-1470 CE) along the narrow valley margins of the middle valley. These features are characterized by above-ground, rectilinear collective tombs (*chullpas*), averaging 2-3 meters to a side. Nearly all *chullpas* encountered had been looted, with human remains and grave goods strewn across cemetery surfaces, and with much tomb architecture ruined and exposed. In addition to intensive GIS based data collection at each tomb (200+), collection of surface diagnostics and other samples for analysis, we placed survey collection units around an isolated sepulcher for a systematic collection of human remains. The osteology team made preliminary determinations of sex and age, notes on basic pathology, and concluded that this single tomb unit had contained at least 63 individuals representing both women and men, children and adults. We recorded a number of mortuary traits not previously reported for the south coastal Andes – red pigment was found on several crania, and dozens of tombs contained vertebrae ‘propped up’ on wooden posts. We isolated pigment samples for chemical analysis at a later date.

## **FIELD TRIPS**

Students took a field trip to Nasca, where they saw the Nasca lines, local museum, and the massive civic-ceremonial center of Cahuachi. Here, students had the opportunity to meet up with members of other archaeological projects, with whom they could exchange experiences and ideas. Students also traveled to Lima to visit several of the national museums. These experiences provided valuable food for thought as students and staff analyzed excavation and survey data.