

## ANNUAL REPORT: CHINCHA (PERU) 2014 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students and project staff excavate the westernmost sunken court at Huaca Soto (PV57-26)

### GENERAL

The Programa Arqueológico de Chincha hosted its third IFR field school between June 29<sup>th</sup> and August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. The project focuses on the pre-Columbian archaeology 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 dense human occupation and activity, with known sites and settlements dating from the first millennium BCE through the Spanish conquest. Due to its high agricultural productivity, abundant marine resources, rich sources of desert minerals, and favorable location at the nexus of coast-highlands and coastal corridors, the valley was a major focus of settlement for Paracas, Wari, Chincha and Inka peoples. Our current investigation focuses on the earliest settled societies of the Peruvian south coast, called Paracas. We examine the construction and use of monumental platform mounds used as controlled gathering spaces and places for depositing valuable offerings – high value non-local goods, plant and animal subsistence goods, finely crafted pottery and basketry, and human beings. We also investigate the reuse of these ritual spaces during the subsequent 2000 years. In these later depositions, local peoples, itinerant travelers, and highland states are represented in a series of events ranging in size and intensity. In 2014 Chincha field school students took part in excavations and analysis of materials at the monumental Paracas platform mound of Huaca Soto, both the largest surviving Paracas structure and the largest piece of Formative Period architecture south of Lima.

The Programa Arqueológico 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. Staff members worked closely with students – a ratio of 2.5 staff members for every student (project directors, graduate students, and professional Peruvian archaeologists) supports our commitment to practical field pedagogy while maintaining an active research environment. We strive to provide students with independent research projects that suit their interests.

### EXCAVATION AT HUACA SOTO

Excavations in 2014 focused on the monumental *huaca* called Huaca Soto (PV57-26). As 2014 was the first scientific excavation attempted here, our team encountered many unique challenges and surprises. The site is a three-tiered adobe platform mound that was constructed in the Paracas architectural tradition during the Formative Period (approximately 500 to 100 BCE). Each tier, oriented east to west from lowest to highest, contains a major sunken court, the largest of which measures nearly 30 meters square at a height of 15 meters above modern ground level. In three months of excavation with an average daily crew of 15 persons, we opened several dozen 2x2 meter units on the highest tier of the mound. Students were trained in field excavation, theodolite cartography, and spatial analyses and provenience systematics.

The majority of our efforts during excavation focused on the construction sequence of the platform by documenting and cleaning fall debris to expose the superficial-most surviving pre-Columbian architecture, while at the same time excavating two deep 2x2 meter soundings at the court's center aimed at gaging the mound's earliest period of occupation. We were able to identify three of the sunken court's innermost corners, one of which contained a plastered staircase and long access corridor to the mound's exterior (with traces of wall painting in black, red and white). Through careful observation and study of the external portions of the mound where modern irrigation had cut into the surviving architecture, students and staff were able to discern some of the construction techniques employed to support this massive edifice, including a series of external tiers that once would have lent the mound its stepped appearance and provided exclusive access to the huaca's upper levels.

Within the court itself, teams spent much time carefully exposing plastered walls and floors, while excavating the thick ritual deposition left from post-Paracas periods of use (whole camelids, guinea pigs, large ceramic scatterings, Spondylus shell from Ecuador, and a variety of precious stone beads figured prominently). Students were exposed to a variety of fine-ware pottery and soon became adept at distinguishing between Paracas, Topara, Wari, and Chincha pieces. We uncovered an enormous quantity of animal sacrifices in the form of whole prostrate camelids and whole *cuy* (guinea pigs, fur and all!) beginning in the court's superficial layers and continuing downward for 1.5 meters until reaching the first major floor. One student carried out an independent project on these remains as the basis for a formal faunal analysis. Our count continues to rise, but at the moment we have identified around 500 individual guinea pigs and several dozen camelids. Complete animals lacking evidence of disarticulation or cooking suggests that these were offerings or divining instruments.

At the center of the court we conducted a deep sounding in order to reach the initial Paracas occupation layers. Working in a 4x4 meter unit reaching 4 meters below the surface, students and staff discovered several pure Paracas floors, plastered and kept extremely clean with the exception of a few diagnostic post-fire resin painted Paracas ceramic sherds. A second deep unit at the court's northeast corner exposed the original plastered corner, a beautifully preserved plaster wall extending some three meters high. By observing plastering events in conjunction with each Paracas floor, we were able to reconstruct the series of wall reconstructions that gave the court its current shape.

## **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 Ica to explore the regional museum and the sand dunes and oases of Huacachina. Most students chose to travel independently after the fieldschool, even though many had initially

planned to return directly to the U.S. These experiences provided valuable food for thought as students and staff analyzed excavation and survey data.

#### **DATA DISSEMINATION**

The results of our 2014 excavations will be disseminated through several presentations at the Society for American Archaeology's 80<sup>th</sup> annual meeting in San Francisco, CA. Following ongoing analysis of excavation data, we will publish these results as a series of peer-reviewed journal articles, books chapters and other peer-reviewed publications. We attempt to provide fieldschool students with opportunities to co-author presentations or even reviewed papers with our staff, depending on the circumstances of the field season and students' participation in extra, non-scheduled research projects.