

# Living with the Dead:

## Conception and Treatment of the Dead at Pachacamac

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents preliminary results of our 2005 excavations in front of the Pachacamac Temple (a.k.a. Painted Temple) at the famed pre-Hispanic religious center of Pachacamac on the Central Coast of Peru. We recovered over 52 funerary bundles in various states of preservation dating from Middle Lima to Late Horizon. The paper focuses on data and insights into the conception and treatment of the dead as revealed by excavation and examination of 34 bundles that were packed in two levels in a largely undisturbed double-chamber tomb built with wooden posts and beams. Notable features of the tomb include (1) the orderly layout of its bundles around the principal one which had a cinnabar-painted wooden false head, (2) variation in the size, form, construction, contents and preservation of its bundles, (3) its intense use over a number of generations, (4) the builders' and/or users' apparent disregard of earlier burials, and (5) its shallow depth, probable surface markers, and easy access. These and other features of this tomb as well as those of nearby funerary contexts show complex and persistent interaction between the dead and the living. Heads and in some cases much of the bundles had been transferred from one location to another, repackaged and reburied. Thus, we must recognize the limitations of our mortuary analysis as a given funerary context may represent only one phase or facet of a long-term mortuary program.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses major findings from our 2005 excavation of funerary contexts in front of the famed Pachacamac Temple at the site of Pachacamac on the Central Coast of Peru (fig. 1) and preliminary interpretations of their broader significance in regard to the relationship between the living and the dead and the social identity of the latter. The excavation took place

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during the three month-long fieldwork of the Pachacamac Archaeological Project under the co-direction of Izumi Shimada, Rafael Segura and María Rostworowski. Our excavation (fig. 2) of a 7 x 5.5 m area reaching ca. 3 m below surface yielded 52 funerary bundles of various completeness, size, form, style, and state of preservation (fig. 3), in addition to a cache of 18 crania and some assorted post-cranial bones. Together, they span Middle Lima ca. A.D. 300-500 to Ychsma-Inka in the late 15th to early 16th century. Ychsma was a Late Intermediate Period regional chiefdom that flourished on the Central Coast of Peru, especially between the Rimac and Lurín valleys.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

The excavation of funerary contexts is one of the two primary means we have adopted to elucidate the social foundations of Pachacamac. By social foundations, we mean the social identity, composition, role, and organization of the inhabitants who underwrote the daily operation, longevity, and power of Pachacamac. This is one of the principal, long-term research aims of our project.

More specifically, following the “integrated approach” developed to understand Sicán mortuary practices on the north coast by Shimada, we bring to bear a multitude of complementary methods to analyze both the biological and cultural components of the sampled funerary contexts (table 1). In addition to the methods shown here, rounding out our approach are stylistic analyses of funerary bundles and associated grave goods, particularly ceramics and textiles, and archaeological observations of disposition and post-interment alterations of the funerary bundles and varied lines of evidence of ritual activities.

Selection of the excavation area was based on the results of intensive ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey of Sector I conducted in 2003, and excavations in the Pilgrims’ Plaza conducted in 2003, 2004 and 2005. With the hope that a pedestrian path along the north edge of the monumental sector of the site that Uhle recorded on his 1896-7 map had protected some burials from looters, we conducted GPR survey (fig. 4) of an elongated area along the road. As seen here, the radar detected what was tentatively identified as an intact funerary chamber (estimated 3 m diameter) about 1.5 m below surface just a few meters south of the road close to the N-S line that connects the Temple center and the so-called Inka ushnu.

Earlier excavations in the Pilgrims Plaza had revealed disturbed Middle Horizon (Provincial Wari and Pachacamac) cultural deposits (fig. 5) and underlying Early Intermediate Period Lima adobito constructions ca. 1.5 to 2.0 m below surface. Given that the modern surface of the cemetery around the Pachacamac Temple is over 4 meters above the surface of the Pilgrims’ Plaza, we had hoped by excavating the aforementioned location along the road to expose an inferred, intact tomb and pre-Ychsma deposits.

### RESULTS

Our excavation revealed (fig. 6) that the inferred tomb detected by the GPR survey was, indeed, a largely intact keyhole-shaped tomb containing over 34 funerary bundles placed on two levels separated by woven junco mats (fig. 7a and b). With three clear exceptions, the adult bundles were prepared in a similar manner starting with a tightly flexed body as shown here (fig. 8a, b, c, and d). Nearly all Ychsma period funerary bundles we excavated had one or two wooden poles or canes placed vertically for support along the sides of the body (fig. 9a and b). As far as we know, the use of these lateral supports is unique to the Ychsma period funerary bundles. We suggest that they provided stability to the body, assuring that it stayed upright position, and helped with transport of the bundle before and after the primary interment. The tang of a wooden false head was inserted into the top of the principle bundle (fig. 10), while the other bundle “heads” consisted of cloth bags filled with straw anchored to an interior junco sack or cloth bag.

Our osteological examination of 15 badly deteriorated bundles revealed 8 male and 7 female adults. 17 of the remaining 19 bundles ranged from fetus/neonatal to juveniles. Two large, well-preserved bundles were not opened. The use-life of the tomb appears to coincide roughly with the total span of the Ychsma culture from the end of the Middle Horizon, ca. A.D. 1000, to the Late Horizon, ca. A.D. 1460-1533. The tomb was oriented NE-SW and measured 2.25 m (interior) at the widest point toward the west end, at least 3.27 m in length (the east end is not yet defined), and ca. 1.53 m in depth (measuring from its roof to the floor). Its walls were built predominantly with adobes of varied sizes mixed with large cobblestones and limestone blocks. The walls were not free standing, except along the north side; they were angled outward (southward) to retain the edges of a large pit that was dug into the unconsolidated, sandy deposits that contained at least four earlier graves pertaining to the Middle Lima (fig. 11a and b) and late Provincial Wari. The free standing but incurving north wall (fig. 12), the only one with mud mortar, proved to be the south wall of a large contiguous and presumably earlier tomb that lay immediately below the modern road.

A roof made of superimposed layers of totora leaves and supported by 12 wooden beams (*Lúcuma*) covered the excavated tomb. The east end apparently had been destroyed in the Late Horizon when stone fill containing numerous sherds, human bones and other remains from decayed or disturbed funerary bundles was poured in to the tomb, probably to cover a cluster of at least eight funerary bundles that had been unceremoniously tossed in (fig. 13).

The chamber tomb and the nearby complete and partial burials, most of which overlap in time attest to the diverse manners in which the dead and the living interacted over a long time span, and the intensity of funerary use of this area close to the Pachacamac Temple.

Our stratigraphic examination (fig. 14) suggests surprisingly that the top of the tomb roof and the inferred entry were only 15-20 or fewer cm below the original ground surface, and

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perhaps were visible and readily accessible during the long period of its use. Its superficial location coincides with the top of a vertical wooden post planted in the tomb, and two nearby structures (fig. 15a and b) that we infer to have served as receptacles for food offerings or basin for libations for the dead. Each has a circular concave basin with smooth, superimposed clay linings atop a cylindrical base. Well-preserved pellets of burrowing owls full of tiny bone fragments and fur and numerous carcasses of rodents in the interstices of funerary bundles also argue that the tomb was relatively close to the ground surface and accessible.

The inferred ready access to the tomb interior and contents is supported by other lines of evidence. The disposition of the funerary bundles, particularly those in the lower level, indicates they were methodically arrayed around the largest and the most elaborate bundle (fig. 10) set at the southeast corner of the tomb, the farthest away from the inferred tomb entry at the east end of the tomb. Logically, then, the principal bundle was the first to be placed in the tomb. Stylistically, its cinnabar-painted and feather-decorated wooden false head dates to the terminal Middle Horizon, ca. A.D. 1000. False heads on some of the surrounding bundles (fig. 16) are structurally and stylistically simpler and may well date later.

At the same time, the principal bundle, at least its outer layers, is the best preserved. The anachronistic appearance vis-à-vis the false head begs an explanation. One possibility is that, given its apparent high status, it was well cared for after the original placement in the tomb with its wrappings occasionally replaced as Dwyer and Dwyer noted for Paracas Necropolis bundles. Alternatively, it could have been relocated from its original burial site and the bundle renewed in process.

There are suggestions of post-interment alterations of other bundles. For example, the upper front portion of one bundle was cut into open to remove the head. Two other bundles were also missing heads from otherwise complete and articulated skeletons, although we did not recognize any clear signs of intentional opening.

Near the tomb, we encountered the complete body of an adult woman bundled together with the heads of a juvenile and an adult (fig. 17). Additionally, we documented circular or oval patches roughly 30 to 35 cm across containing foot bones and various other items that are commonly found in funerary bundles (fig. 18a and b) – telltale signs left behind of decaying funerary bundles that had been removed. Wherever these bundles were destined to go, given their poor preservation, it is likely that they were first re-wrapped.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Data and observations we presented here, albeit highly condensed, allow us to offer some preliminary interpretations regarding late pre-Hispanic attitudes toward the dead and the social identity of those buried in front of the Pachacamac Temple.

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It is evident that many of the funerary bundles we recovered both within and outside the chamber tomb had a complex history, perhaps before and certainly after the primary interment, so that even their coexistence in the same tomb cannot be uncritically used to determine the date of death or the primary interment of the dead. We are about to begin systematic AMS-dating of samples of soft tissue of the dead and their bundle wrappings to determine not only the correlation between them, but also between these dates and the relative location and preservation state of the bundles.

At this point, however, we believe that the individuals in this chamber tomb died at different times, and were brought together to assert some important relationships among the people and things placed within it. A logical interpretation would be that the tomb as a whole symbolized a corporate kin group that shared an ancestor, presumably the individual in the largest and most elaborate bundle, similar to the situation posited for multi-bundle tombs at the Paracas Necropolis of Wari Kayan. While Peter Eeckhout's suggestion that those who suffered from serious maladies in their life were buried close to the Pachacamac Temple with its healing power is not incompatible with this view, the bundle orientation and arrangement in the tomb suggest other factors at play.

The presence of two bundles that markedly differ from others in the tomb in the material and style used in construction as well as objects contained within them questions this notion of ancestor worship and corporate identity and unity. At the same time, these two bundles are both missing heads. As in the case of post-interment alterations documented on the north coast among the burials we excavated at Pachacamac, the cranium was the element most often removed from or added to the burial.

We have many other unresolved questions about the excavated funerary contexts. What is apparent, however, is that the chamber tomb containing many individuals of different generation, age, sex, role, and status was a "work in progress." Along with its physical transformations, the associated collective memory and identity were periodically redefined for upwards of 500 years. Even though the tomb may have contained a few individuals of different geographical or ethnic origins, it was actively maintained, while other nearby funerary contexts were left ignored or destroyed by later intrusive burials. In fact, the high density of burials and their divergent states of preservation in the excavated area suggest that, regardless of the presence or absence of earlier burials, if they were not regularly cared for, their locations could be usurped. Such competition for access to the presumed sacred ground is indeed exactly what we documented in the nearby Pilgrims' Plaza. Clearly, the sanctity of the existing burials was respected as long as they remained in the consciousness of the living descendants and associates and were accordingly cared for.