

## ANNUAL REPORT: CHINCHA (PERU) 2015 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students excavate at Huaca Soto, Sector B

### GENERAL

The Programa Arqueológico de Chincha hosted its fourth IFR field school between June 28<sup>th</sup> and August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015. The project focuses on the pre-Columbian archaeology of Peru's Chincha Valley, a wide alluvial drainage that crosses the northern reaches of the arid Atacama Desert. The valley has long been an area of dense human occupation and activity due to its high agricultural productivity, nearby abundant marine resources, rich sources of desert minerals, and favorable location at the nexus of coast-highlands and coastal trading corridors. Chincha hosts settlements associated with the Paracas, Wari, Chincha, and Inca cultures, among others, ranging from the first-millennium BCE through the Spanish Colonial Period.

Our current investigation focuses on the earliest settled societies of the Peruvian south coast. We examine the construction, occupation and use of monumental, three-tiered platform structures built by Paracas communities in the mid first-millennium BCE. These ceremonial mounds were highly controlled gathering spaces and places for depositing ritual offerings – high-value non-local goods, plant and animal subsistence products, finely crafted pottery and basketry, and even human beings. These temples remained sacred spaces in post-Paracas times. Over the next 2000 years, local peoples, itinerant travelers, and highland states reused Paracas ritual architecture for a variety of ceremonial events ranging in size and intensity. In 2015, Chincha field school students took part in excavations and analysis of materials at a monumental Paracas platform mound called Huaca Soto, both the largest surviving Paracas temple and the largest piece of Formative Period architecture south of Lima.

The Programa Arqueológico Chincha emphasizes a data-driven approach to reconstructing Paracas ritual practices. 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 work closely with students – a ratio of 1 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 agenda.

We strive to provide students with independent research projects that suit their interests. Our goal is to provide students with a realistic understanding of scientific field work.

### **EXCAVATION AT HUACA SOTO**

Excavations in 2015 focused on the monumental *huaca* called Huaca Soto (PV57-26). 2015 was our second season of excavation at the site. Huaca Soto is a three-tiered adobe platform mound that was constructed in the Paracas architectural tradition during the Formative Period (approximately 800 to 100 BCE). Each tier, oriented east to west from lowest to highest, contains a major sunken court. The middle court, called Sector B, measures nearly 30 meters square at a height of 15 meters above modern ground level. In two months of excavation with an average daily crew of 20 persons, we opened several dozen 2x2 meter units in Sector B. The goal of these excavations was to expose architecture and reconstruct the construction sequence of Huaca Soto. Students were trained in field excavation, topographic mapping, architectural analysis, as well as provenience systematics. In the laboratory, students gained experience in ceramic analysis, analysis of adobe-making techniques, map-making, field conservation, and had the opportunity to observe ongoing analyses of fauna, human remains, and shell materials.

The majority of our efforts during excavation focused on the construction sequence of Sector B by documenting and cleaning overburden to expose the surviving pre-Columbian architecture. At the same time we excavated a deep 10 x 10 meter sounding at the court's center with the goal of determining the sector's earliest period of occupation. We were able to identify all four of the sunken court's innermost corners, one of which contained a long access corridor from the mound's eastern-most court (Sector C). We also discovered a long staircase traversing the western wall of Sector B, which connected the court with the highest and most restricted access court in Sector A (the western most court excavated in 2014). Excavation of this staircase feature revealed that the court was once covered by a roof of reed matting. Several offerings were found in the staircase itself, including a large portion of *Spondylus* bead collar and several post-Paracas fineware serving bowls.

At the center of the court, students and staff identified a post-Paracas domestic occupation of Sector B. This feature included dozens of post-holes (several with wooden beams *in situ*), domestic ceramics, grinding stones and utilitarian lithics, cooking pottery, and basic household tools. Students were exposed to a variety of fine-ware pottery and soon became adept at distinguishing between Paracas, Topara, and Nasca, pieces. We discovered a variety of offerings at the base of several post-holes, including copper and bone *tupu* pins, the beak of a non-local parrot, and beads made from *Spondylus* shell and crysacola stone.

In the deep-sounding at the courts center, below post-Paracas domestic layers, we discovered pure Paracas floors, plastered and kept extremely clean with the exception of a few diagnostic post-fire resin painted Paracas ceramic sherds. One lower floor was so well preserved that human footprints were visible in the plaster. We successfully cast these footprints and made a permanent record of these fragile finds.

### **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 Pisco and the Paracas Peninsula, as well as a field trip to several large Chincha-period sites within the valley. 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 data and interpreted the history of Huaca Soto.

#### **DATA DISSEMINATION**

The results of our 2015 excavations will be disseminated through several presentations at the Society for American Archaeology's 81<sup>th</sup> annual meeting in Orlando, FL. 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.