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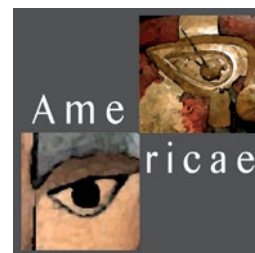
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# Plaza settings and public interactions during the Formative Period in Nepeña, North-Central Coast of Peru

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In this article, we evaluate the relationships between plaza settings, ritual performances, and modes of sociopolitical integration in coastal Ancash during the Formative Period (local Cerro Blanco, Nepeña, and Samanco phases, 1100-150 cal. BC). We chronicle shifts in the forms, dimensions, arrangements, and use of plaza settings to investigate deeper sociopolitical transformations in the Nepeña Valley. Recent field research in the region suggests the development of polities and communities of different levels of integration. This process coincides with the abandonment of Chavín and Cupisnique related ceremonial centers between 800 and 500 cal. BC. Our respective field projects have brought detailed archaeological information on the organization of plaza settings, their location within each community, as well as their ritual use. In particular, we analyze data from the sites of Cerro Blanco, Caylán, Huambacho, Samanco, and Kushipampa. By comparing plaza settings and associated assemblages, we delineate different modes of sociopolitical integration and evaluate longitudinal changes in regional politics. The analysis of proxemic data, ritual paraphernalia, and feasting remains suggest the existence of three clusters of ritual life in Nepeña during the Formative Period. Results further suggest that after the demise of Chavín-Cupisnique centers, and at least in some areas of coastal Ancash, ritual practices became more decentralized and appropriated by multiple competing groups. At that time major geopolitical differences appear to have existed between the lower and middle portions of the coastal drainage. The Nepeña research confirms the value of regional and comparative approaches to study broader relationships between political authority, ritual performance, and public spaces in ancient complex societies.

Keywords: public spaces, plaza settings, ritual performance, proxemics, comparative analysis, Formative Period, Central Andes, Nepeña Valley.

## Places et interactions publiques durant la période formative dans la vallée de Nepeña, côte nord-centrale du Pérou

Dans cet article, nous évaluons les relations entre les espaces publics (places), les performances rituelles et les modes d'intégration sociopolitique dans la zone côtière du département d'Ancash au Pérou durant la période formative (phases locales Cerro Blanco, Nepeña et Samanco, 1100-150 cal. av. J.-C.). Nous nous intéressons aux formes, dimensions, organisations et fonctions de ces espaces dans le but d'explorer les profondes transformations sociopolitiques qui secouèrent la vallée de Nepeña durant la période formative. Des fouilles archéologiques récentes dans la région suggèrent le développement d'entités politiques et de communautés à différentes échelles d'intégration. Ce processus coïncide avec l'abandon des centres cérémoniels associés aux phénomènes Chavín et Cupisnique entre 800 et 500 cal. av. J.-C. Nos projets de terrain respectifs fournissent des données archéologiques sur l'organisation des places, leur positionnement au sein de chaque communauté, de même que leurs fonctions rituelles. Nous analysons en particulier les données provenant des sites de Cerro Blanco, Caylán, Huambacho, Samanco et Kushipampa. En comparant les places et les caractéristiques des artefacts qui y ont été recueillis, nous identifions des modes distincts d'intégration sociopolitique et évaluons les changements diachroniques au niveau politique et régional. L'analyse de données proxémiques, des objets rituels et des restes de festin suggère l'existence de trois types ou groupes de vie rituelle dans la vallée de Nepeña durant la période formative. Nos résultats indiquent qu'à la suite du déclin des centres Chavín et Cupisnique, les pratiques rituelles devinrent, pour le moins dans certaines régions côtières d'Ancash, décentralisées et sous le contrôle de multiples groupes en compétition les uns avec les autres. À cette époque, des différences géopolitiques majeures existaient entre les basses et moyennes vallées côtières. Nos recherches à Nepeña confirment l'utilité des approches régionales et comparatives dans le cadre plus vaste de l'étude des relations entre l'autorité politique, les performances rituelles et les espaces publics au cours du développement des sociétés complexes anciennes.

Mots-clés : espaces publics, places, performance rituelle, proxémie, analyse comparative, période formative, Andes centrales, vallée de Nepeña.

### Plazas e interacciones públicas durante el Periodo Formativo en el valle de Nepeña, costa norcentral del Perú

*En este artículo, evaluamos las relaciones entre los contextos espaciales públicos (plazas), las actuaciones rituales, y los modos de integración sociopolítica en la costa del Departamento de Ancash en Perú durante el Periodo Formativo (las fases locales Cerro Blanco, Nepeña y Samanco, 1100-150 cal. a.C.). Analizamos la variabilidad en formas, dimensiones, organización espacial, y funciones de las plazas con el objetivo de explorar las profundas transformaciones sociopolíticas que marcaron el valle de Nepeña durante el Periodo Formativo. Recientes investigaciones arqueológicas en la región sugieren el desarrollo de entidades políticas y comunidades de diferentes escalas de integración. Este proceso coincide con el abandono de los centros ceremoniales asociados con los fenómenos Chavín y Cupisnique entre 800 y 500 cal. a.C. Nuestros proyectos de investigación respectivos brindan datos arqueológicos sobre la organización de las plazas, su ubicación dentro de cada comunidad, así como sus funciones rituales. En particular, analizamos los datos de los sitios de Cerro Blanco, Caylán, Huambacho, Samanco y Kushipampa. A través de la comparación de las plazas y los artefactos excavados en sus espacios, delimitamos distintos modos de integración sociopolítica y evaluamos los cambios diacrónicos al nivel político y regional. El análisis de los datos proxémicos, de los objetos rituales y de los restos de festines sugiere la existencia de tres tipos o grupos de vida ritual en el valle de Nepeña durante el Periodo Formativo. Nuestros resultados indican que después de la caída de los centros Chavín y Cupisnique, las prácticas rituales cambiaron, a lo menos en ciertas regiones de la costa ancashina, hacia patrones más descentralizados y bajo el control de múltiples grupos en competencia entre ellos. Diferencias geopolíticas significativas aparecen entre el valle bajo y medio. Nuestras investigaciones en Nepeña confirman la utilidad de los enfoques regionales y comparativos en el estudio de las relaciones entre la autoridad política, las actuaciones rituales, y los espacios públicos en el desarrollo de las sociedades complejas prehispánicas.*

Palabras claves: espacios públicos, plazas, actuación ritual, proxémica, análisis comparativo, periodo formativo, Andes centrales, valle de Nepeña.

The study of plazas as privileged spaces of cultural affirmations, religious performances, social encounters and political negotiations has a long history in Americanist research (Hardoy and Hardoy 1978; Low 1995; Richardson 1982; Sallnow 1987). Archaeologists and art historians, with their emphasis on buildings and their representations, have been particularly keen on exploring the spatial organization and role of plazas as stages in the production of public gatherings, theatrical performances, and religious ceremonies. Archaeologists also investigate the role these activities have in the constitution of society and the reproduction of political orders (Inomata 2006a; Moore 1996a; Vaughn et al. 2016). In the Central Andes, a combination of anthropological methods and perspectives have delineated rich, diverse and heterogeneous traditions of public spaces or plazas, from small courtyards inside temples (Shady et al. 2003), to vast open fields at pilgrimage and administrative centers (Morris et al. 2011; Shimada et al. 2004; Silverman 1994). Scholars have typically contrasted three main traditions of Andean plazas including sunken spaces (e.g., Mito, Kotosh, Chiripa, Pukara, Tiwanaku), open plazas and main public squares (e.g., Inka), and enclosed or walled courtyards (e.g., Chimú) (Moore 1996a). Our article builds on these observations and suggests the existence of multiple clusters of distinct plaza settings in Nepeña, a small valley of the modern Department of Ancash on the north-central coast of Peru, during the first millennium BC.

By stringing together ethnographic observations (e.g., Allen 1988; Gose 1994; Sallnow 1987; Urton 1996)—including capacity estimates, ritual paraphernalia, musical performance, dances, and utterances—and architectural data from ancient plaza settings, archaeologists have been increasingly interested in symbolic-interactionist issues

(see Blumer 1969), including proxemics, performances, and other forms of relationality (Helmer et al. 2012; Moore 1996b, 2005; Swenson 2011). This article contributes to this growing and important literature by looking at shifts and variations in architectural settings and material culture, and what those shifts suggest about the development and variability of early political organizations. We are particularly interested in different types of gathering spaces from the Formative Period (1600-100 BC); a time frame sometime divided into the Initial Period and Early Horizon, and associated with the rise of complex agrarian societies and pan-regional religions, including the Chavín culture of the north-central highlands of Peru.

Since the pioneering work of Julio C. Tello, scholars have recognized Chavín de Huántar (ca. 1000-500/400 BC) as a major influence in Andean geopolitics and religious interactions. Most archaeologists agree that Chavín de Huántar, with its monumental U-shaped temples, sunken plazas, abundant stone sculptures, and spectacular therianthrope imagery, anchored a pan-regional religious network (Burger 1992; Rowe 1967; Urton 1996). The site of Chavín occupied a privileged position within this sphere of influence, most likely acting as a powerful oracle and pilgrimage center (Burger 1981, 1984, 1988, 2008). Similarities in ritual paraphernalia, religious imagery, and ceremonial architecture have been used to argue for the vast geographic ramifications of the Chavín phenomenon (Burger and Matos 2002), including interactions with Paracas on the south coast (Cordy-Collins 1979), Manchay on the central coast (Burger and Salazar-Burger 2014), and Cupisnique on the north coast of Peru (Nesbitt 2012). Participants in the Chavín cult or sphere of influence engaged in long-distance pilgrimages to the highland center of Chavín de Huántar, as well as other sacred

places that became linked through practice, memory and iconic ritual objects. Recent research has raised questions regarding the chronology, extent and nature of the Chavín network (Burger and Salazar-Burger 2008; Kembel and Haas 2015; Mesía 2007; Rick 2005, 2008; Rick et al. 2011; Sayre 2010), as well as the diversity of religious practices during the first millennium BC (Burger 1993). In this article, we look at communities and plaza settings in Nepeña, a small valley traditionally associated with the Chavín phenomenon (Tello 1943; see MAAUNMSM 2005), where our respective excavation projects have revealed a surprising geopolitical heterogeneity (Chicoine et al. 2017). We take a comparative approach and examine different plaza settings, contexts of performance, and associated ritual furniture, objects, and consumption goods. We focus on the sociopolitical reorganization associated with the rise and fall of the Chavín and Cupisnique-related religious traditions, the intensification of inter-community competition, the fragmentation of ritual spaces, and the centralization—in some areas—of political formations (Ikehara and Chicoine 2011; Ikehara 2016).

Based on settlement patterns, the scale and organization of religious monuments, and the distribution of ceramic styles, polities and communities of different levels of sociopolitical integration appear to develop at the end of the Nepeña Phase (800-450 cal. BC) and during the following Samanco Phase (450-150 cal. BC) (Ikehara and Chicoine 2011). These developments appear to coincide with the disintegration of the Chavín sphere of interaction, perhaps around 500 or 400 cal. BC (Burger 2008; Rick 2008). In Nepeña, this transition is associated with the abandonment of U-shaped temples and a rejection or avoidance of Chavín-related religious iconographies including anthropomorphized felines and other composite supernatural beings. This suggests profound ideological changes. Data from plaza settings provide a complementary line of evidence and indicate concomitant changes in the scale, location, and group composition of social gatherings and ceremonies. We are particularly interested in examining the location of plazas within settlements, assessing the scale and composition of plaza gatherings, and investigating the materialization of ritual practices. Through a comparison of plaza settings we hope to delineate different clusters of performance and sociopolitical integration. Differences in the fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed features of the plaza settings are interpreted as linked to more profound shifts in the nature of ritual life and ceremonial encounters, including pilgrimages, group-centered initiations, mortuary practices, and more broadly ancestor veneration.

Our analysis focuses on sites where recent excavations have yielded data on the spatial organization of plazas, their place within settlements, as well as associated activity remains. In particular, we compare plaza areas and settings from the archaeological sites of Cerro Blanco, Huaca Partida, Caylán, Huambacho, Samanco,

and Kushipampa (Figure 1). Through proxemics lenses, we compare the architectural properties and associated remains recently recovered at plazas (i.e., large unroofed spaces used for public and/or ceremonial gatherings). The variables under study include the size of the plazas, locations within settlements, spatial organization (e.g., walls, benches, accessways), visual arts, and associated remains. We establish the size and diversity of the social encounters during ritual performances, and evaluate the diversity/exclusivity of social activities carried out inside the plazas. By looking at the architectural and material datasets from the six settlements, we take a longitudinal approach and analyze the concomitant transformation of public spaces and politics during the Formative Period, divided into a local chronology discussed below. Our goal is to utilize plazas as proxies for understanding deeper societal shifts during that important time period, and thus shed light on broader patterns of cultural developments in the ritual life of ancient Andean people.

Our results indicate the existence of three distinct clusters of ritual practices in the Nepeña Valley as materialized in different combinations of plaza features, social compositions, and material assemblages. While Middle Formative plazas (local Cerro Blanco Phase, 1100-800 cal. BC) indicate a high level of integration and the predominance of one or two ceremonial centers, by the end of the Late Formative (local Nepeña Phase, 800-450 cal. BC) and during the subsequent Final Formative (local Samanco Phase, 450-150 cal. BC), ritual practices became decentralized as seen in the multiplication of ritual settings, their lesser degree of canonical specialization, emphasis on feasting and alcohol consumption, and the incorporation of ritual settings within residential units (Chicoine 2010a, 2011; Ikehara et al. 2013). We suggest that those gatherings emphasized and promoted group identity, perhaps through initiation rites, funerals, and other kin-based ceremonies, in a context of increased factional competition and social tensions. This emphasis on enclosed plazas contrasts with previous patterns of open plazas at U-shaped temples where large-scale processions were more common. More broadly, our study highlights the development of diverse political organizations in coastal Ancash during the first millennium BC.

## PLAZA SETTINGS, MATERIAL STAGES, AND SOCIOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our objective in this article is to reconstruct patterns of ritual practices through an analysis of built settings, portable liturgical objects, and consumption refuse. We are particularly interested in considering the relationships between the scales of ritual practice, integration, and spectacle, and the modes of religious authority, social control, and elite strategies. Starting from the premise that there exists no clear division between religious ceremonies and public spectacles, we interpret the design,



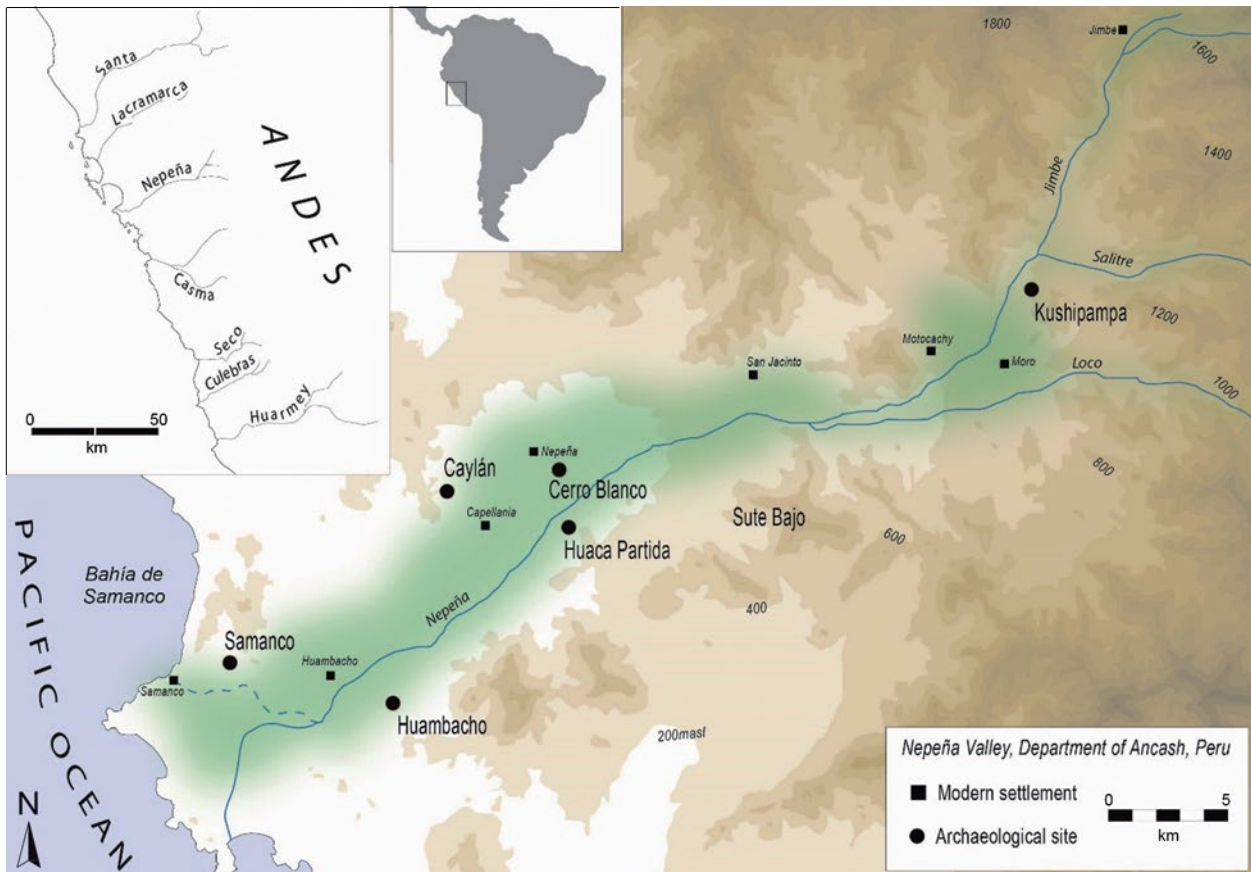


Figure 1. Map of the Nepeña Valley showing the Formative Period archaeological sites discussed in the text (© D. Chicoine).

use, abandonment, and renovation of plaza settings as potent political actions. Not only do ritual public actions have the capacity to transcend daily experiences, they represent ideal moments to affirm, negotiate, resist, and/or reaffirm relations of power. In other words, public actions are key to the materialization of ideology (DeMarrais et al. 1996).

Scholars usually agree that ancient Andean plazas were often venues for key rituals combining speech, music, dance, and visual displays. These special places brought community members together, enacted social distinctions and reaffirmed the validity of cosmic ontologies (Moore 1996a: 792). People cleared, built, maintained, and renovated different forms of plazas which provided a vast array of settings for public encounters. Differences in the scale of built settings set limits on forms of ritual communication (see Hall 1959, 1966, 1968, 1972) and have the potential to affirm and reinforce social differences including inequalities. These encounters, or performances, enabled communal integration, competition, and negotiation which played central roles in social and political dynamics. As cogently pointed out by Richardson (1982: 217),

Making continual sense out of the slippery reality of everyday life is a process that integrates the material setting which surrounds a place, the behavior which occurs within that surrounding, and the image which place presents, into a single segment, a social place,

which contrasts with other segments that make up a people's social universe. [...] *Thus, the material setting of a social place becomes a stage that people scan for cues as to what acts they should select from their behavioral repertoire* (p. 217, emphasis added).

In the Andes, for instance, Urton (1992: 250-251) notes how status differentiation in the modern highlands of Peru can be enacted through relative physical positions when people sit together. Here, social identities between *ayllu* members are enacted when people sit together in a U-shape, with elders and people of higher status sitting at the closest end of the U, while juniors sit at the extremities. Similar relational concepts are latent in plaza encounters and expressed in paralinguistic, verbal, and non-verbal modes communication.

Ritual practices are politicized human behaviors that potentially reproduce structures of inequality as well as communal ideology (DeMarrais 2004: 11; Kertzner 1988: 82; Tilley 1994: 27). Hence, the study of ritual practices and their variability across time and space allow for the comparisons of modes of political authority from centralized state-sponsored festivals to small household shrine offerings and communal ancestor worship. Here we are particularly interested in reconstructing landscapes of ritual practices within a small valley of coastal Ancash and monitor their changes over centuries during the transition from the Middle to the Late and Final Formative (ca. 1200-100 BC, see Kaulicke 2010).

To explore patterns of ritual practices, we focus on the social composition of ritual groups, the settings in which religious behaviors take place, the level of control and access over esoteric knowledge, and the perceptive qualities of the ceremonial performances. We recognize that rituals are emotionally laden contexts that communicate extraordinary meanings through a series of paralinguistic, verbal and nonverbal means of communication. Here, we are especially concerned with built plaza spaces, and their associated remains.

People both create architecture and find their behaviors influenced by it (Tilley 1994: 10). Ritual settings are special places that play an active role in guiding individual actions and shaping social interactions (Lawrence and Low 1990: 454; e.g., Moore 1996a). Here we borrow from Rapoport's (1982, 2006) concept of "setting" and understand plazas as composed of several fixed, semi-fixed, and portable elements (Hall 1966: 101; Rapoport 1982: 88-96). Fixed-feature elements change rarely and slowly, and correspond to architectural elements (e.g., floor plans). Semifixed-feature elements can be arranged and rearranged fairly quickly, such as furniture, curtains, and decorations. Nonfixed-feature elements relate to human occupants in a particular setting, their shifting spatial relations, body positions and postures, facial expressions and speech rate, among other things. Combined, those elements yield insights into how settings create constancy in the interpretation of the cues and meanings encoded in the built environment. In turn, such constancy is critical in the routinization of culture and its transmission (see Goodenough 2003).

Reconstructing plaza settings demands a consideration of the *mise-en-scène* of special events and the possibility of the shifting usage and meaning, or multivocality of space. The overall permanency of built settings distinguishes them from other classes of cultural production. This confers architecture a special status inasmuch as it becomes a unique theater for social interactions. Built settings are catalysts of latent behaviors and are critical in guiding individuals in their self-referential conception of reality. People's actions are mediated by the perception and decoding of physical and visual cues from the built environment (Rapoport 1976: 9, 1990: 15). For instance, the location of plaza settings within settlements reveal how people self-reflexively monitor their actions, including levels of self-awareness, formality, and politeness (e.g., frontstage vs. backstage [Goffman 1959, 1967, 1971]; see Richardson 1982 for a case study).

Architecture does not, however, only work on the personal level. It has the potential to create spatial boundaries between different social segments and generate forms of social control that are decisive in the exercise of authority and the maintenance of social differences (Hillier and Hanson 1984: 143-175). The control of ritual domains is a powerful asset of authority. The absence from rituals, for instance, can weaken one's social position (Hayden 1995: 74). Hence, rituals are often

theatres for inter-individual competition (Mills 2000: 8). Considering that ritual structures have the potential of becoming agents (Gell 1998: 221), we approach plazas and their associated practices as vehicles for ritual behaviors and social interactions.

Ritual behaviors and social interactions housed in plazas are contextualized in this article as performances. Certain performances can be understood as social dramas that occur outside of "normal", daily activities. According to Turner (1980: 83), these social dramas help to strengthen collective communal identity through different stages of liminality ultimately leading to *communitas*. Anthropological theories of performance have been developed and refined over the last half-century (e.g., Butler 1993; Geertz 1973; Goffman 1967; Kapchan 1995; Schechner 1988; Schieffelin 1985). Most archaeologists agree that public performances, especially in plazas, differ from performances associated with daily life (e.g., Helmer et al. 2012; Houston 2006; Inomata 2006a; but see Hodder 2006 for an exception), although the two can be closely related as we will illustrate in certain Nepeña cases. Public performances differ in terms of scale, social diversity, and function. In the Central Andes, for instance, public performances vary from fertility ceremonies, ancestral displays, sacrifice spectacles, alcohol-based parties, and transcendental hallucinogenic experiences among many others. Many of these acts can be traced in the archaeological record and correlated to sociopolitical organizations. Formative Period Nepeña presents an attractive case study to analyze the relationships between plaza settings and shifting leadership practices.

## PLAZA SETTINGS IN FORMATIVE PERIOD NEPEÑA

Most archaeological research in Nepeña has focused on the Formative Period (e.g., Chicoine 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Chicoine and Ikehara 2014; Helmer 2015; Ikehara 2010a, 2010b, 2016; Daggett 1984, 1987; Proulx 1985; Shibata 2010; Tello 1933a, 1933b, 1933c). In the 1930s, Julio C. Tello excavated spectacular painted friezes at the sites of Cerro Blanco and Punkurí which he used to postulate the existence of Chavín-related communities in the valley (Tello 1933c, 1943; see MAAUNMSM 2005). Since Tello's work, scholars have continued to focus on Nepeña as an important locales for understanding early Andean prehistory.

Since 2002, Shibata (2010, 2011, 2014) has directed excavations at Cerro Blanco and the neighboring contemporary site of Huaca Partida. His work allowed the elaboration of a chronological sequence for the Formative in Nepeña (Shibata 2010, 2011). Based on superimposed construction episodes and associated changes in ceramic styles, Shibata recognizes four phases: (1) Huambocayán (1500-1100 cal. BC), (2) Cerro Blanco



Central Andes	Local phase	Cal. BC	Sites in text
Final Formative	Samanco	450-150	Caylán; Huambacho; Samanco; Kushipampa ( <i>late occupations</i> )
Late Formative	Nepeña	800-450	Caylán; Huambacho ( <i>early occupations</i> ) Cerro Blanco; Huaca Partida ( <i>late occupations</i> )
Middle Formative	Cerro Blanco	1100-800	Cerro Blanco; Huaca Partida ( <i>early occupations</i> )
	Huambocayán	1500-1100	

**Table 1.** Chronological table for the Formative Period in the Nepeña Valley, Peru (© Authors).

(1100-800 cal. BC), Nepeña (800-450 cal. BC), and Samanco (450-150 cal. BC) (Table 1).

The data presented here come from survey and excavation fieldwork carried out by our respective research projects since 2002. Looking at the location of plaza settings within each site, their size, internal organization, and visual arts, as well as associated materials, multiple trends can be differentiated. Our sample includes five sites located in the middle and lower valley whose occupations span the Middle to Final Formative, or from the Cerro Blanco to the Samanco Phase. A sixth site, Huaca Partida, is briefly discussed and illustrated in order to provide information about the canonical messages associated with the Chavín-related U-shaped temples and their associated plazas. Here we provide a brief description of each site and its associated plazas. Capacity estimates for each plaza are based on ratios adapted from Moore's listing of audience sizes in Andean ceremonial spaces (0.46 m<sup>2</sup>/person, 3.6 m<sup>2</sup>/person, 21.6 m<sup>2</sup>/person; Moore 1996b: 149, table 4.6). We eschew more liberal and conservative ratios, and develop a finer-grained, middle-of-the-road estimate scheme with ratios of 3.7 m<sup>2</sup>/person, 6.12 m<sup>2</sup>/person, and 10 m<sup>2</sup>/person (Table 2). It is significant to note that the middle-range rate of 3.7 m<sup>2</sup>/person appears to most closely match capacity and settlement population estimates provided for plazas in the Maya world (Inomata 2006a and b; Liendo et al. 2014: 116). Finally, one must take note that as a nonfixed-feature element the number of people within a given space at a particular time can vary based on the nature and scale of the event. Thus, the estimates have to be used with caution, but provide some reference for understanding the relative scales of human interactions. Excavation data are provided when available for each plaza discussed.

#### MIDDLE-LATE FORMATIVE PERIOD: CERRO BLANCO AND HUACA PARTIDA

The ceremonial center of Cerro Blanco (1100-450 cal. BC) is located on the northern bank of the Nepeña River, some 20 km inland from the coastline (145 masl). The initial layout of the site dates back to

the Cerro Blanco Phase (1100-800 cal. BC). Excavations revealed megalithic architecture built on top of the original temple during the following Nepeña Phase (800-450 cal. BC). By the beginning of the Samanco Phase, around 500 cal. BC, the temple was in ruins and largely abandoned. The Cerro Blanco Phase architecture of the site comprises three artificial mounds that form a U-shaped configuration, which enclose a 8500 m<sup>2</sup> central plaza (Figure 2, next pages). Capacity estimates average 2,300 occupants for the Central Plaza. It is enclosed to the west by a central mound or "Main Platform" measuring 115 m by 85 m at its base and 15 m in height. The north and south portions of the plaza are delimited by lower lateral mounds. Excavations have revealed that the central plaza, at least during the Cerro Blanco Phase, was fronted by rooms decorated with polychrome murals depicting supernatural predator imagery (Tello 1943; see MAAUNMSM 2005). Similar murals were recently discovered at the neighboring contemporary site of Huaca Partida and the symbolic analysis of their imagery suggests a tripartite cosmology aligned with Chavín-related, as well as contemporary Amazonian worldviews (Shibata 2017) (Figures 3 and 4, next pages).

Fieldwork at Cerro Blanco has yielded evidence for feasting activities in association with the use and renovation of the north lateral mound (or wing), adjacent to the central plaza (Ikehara and Shibata 2008; Ikehara et al. 2013). Findings include large fermentation buckets for the preparation of manioc and corn beer, as well as a series of smaller finely crafted serving vessels such as cups and bowls. Remains of special objects were discovered in association with the feasting contexts including anthracite mirrors, ear spools, cinnabar pigments, obsidian, and a variety of animal bones. Taxonomic analyses identified camelids, deer, canines, and a wealth of shellfish.

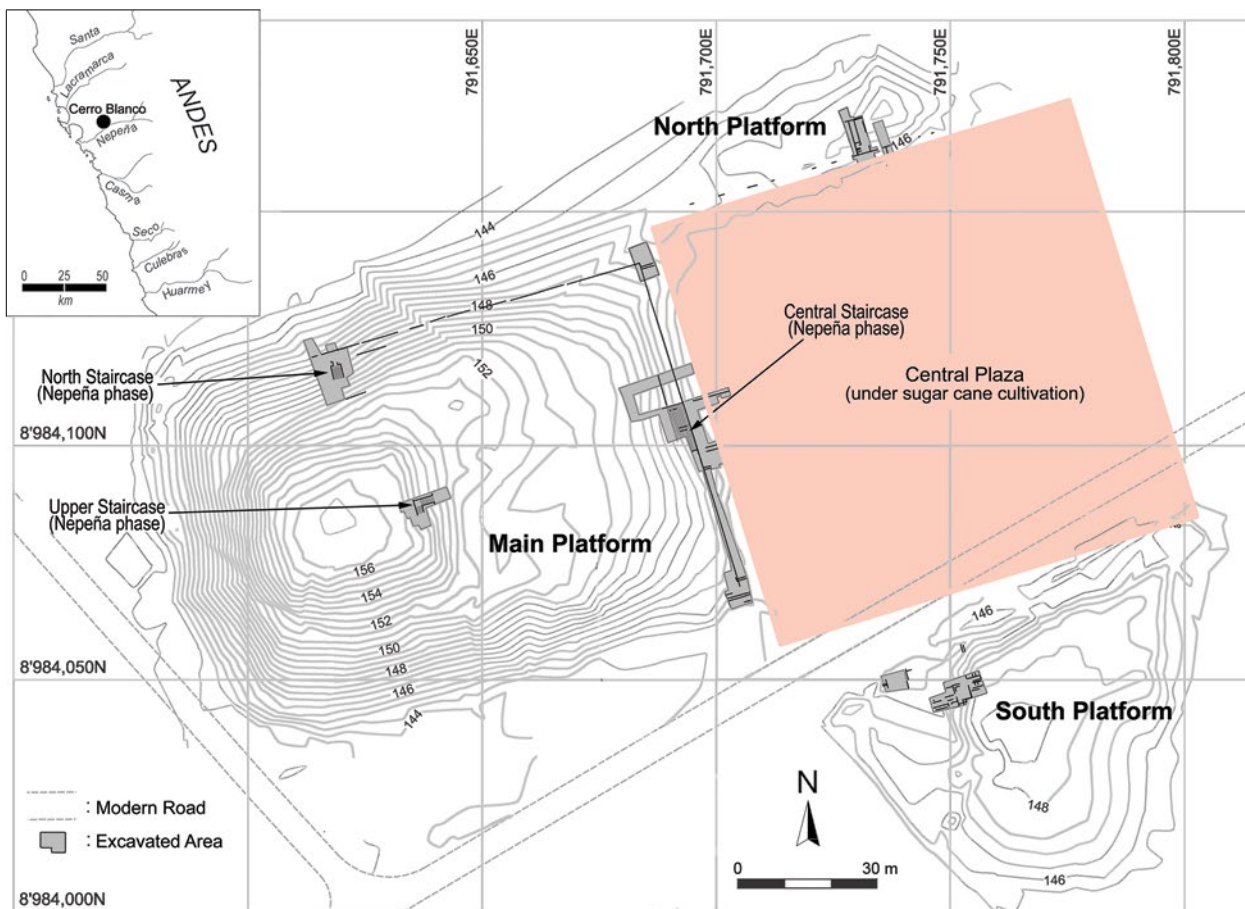
It is likely that episodic, festive gatherings and processions were carried out within the Central Plaza. Overall, this aligns well with Chavín and Cupisnique ceremonial traditions. The plaza forms the core of the entire Cerro Blanco ceremonial complex. Like most typical U-shaped mound-and-plaza complexes, Cerro Blanco opens up towards the upper valley and the river watershed. It is

Site	Plaza	Total (m <sup>2</sup> )	Capacity estimates		
			10 m <sup>2</sup> /pp	6.12 m <sup>2</sup> /pp	3.7 m <sup>2</sup> /pp
<b>Cerro Blanco</b>	Central	8500	850	1389	2297
<b>Caylán*</b>	AI	85	8	14	23
	AD	118	12	19	32
	AQ	209	21	34	56
	U	234	23	38	63
	S	302	30	49	82
	AL	393	39	64	106
	AR	403	40	66	109
	K	483	48	79	131
	AN	517	52	85	140
	AP	524	52	86	142
	AA	525	53	86	142
	AO	530	53	87	143
	T	534	53	87	144
	AM	569	57	93	154
	L	596	60	97	161
	O	611	61	100	165
	AH	614	61	100	166
	P	637	64	104	172
	Q	690	69	113	186
	AB	724	72	118	196
	R	779	78	127	210
	AJ	849	85	139	229
	Y	850	85	139	230
	W	889	89	145	240
	AF	1044	104	171	282
	H	1053	105	172	285
	N	1101	110	180	297
	AK	1107	111	181	299
	G	1110	111	181	300
	AE	1130	113	185	305
	E	1169	117	191	316
	M	1179	118	193	319
	V	1198	120	196	324
	AC	1441	144	235	389
	X	1548	155	253	418
	AG	1732	173	283	468
	B	1733	173	283	468
	J	1851	185	302	500
	A	1908	191	312	516
	D	2196	220	359	594
	Z	2375	237	388	642
	I	2945	295	481	796
	F	5318	532	869	1437
	χ	1065	107	174	288
	σ	917	92	150	248
	<b>Total</b>		<b>4580</b>	<b>7484</b>	<b>12378</b>
<b>Huambacho</b>	A	6084	608	994	1644
	B	3304	330	540	893
	χ	4694	469	767	1269
	σ	1966	197	321	531
	<b>Total</b>		<b>939</b>	<b>1534</b>	<b>2537</b>

Samanco	Plaza Mayor	1590	159	260	430
Kushipampa	A	2432	243	397	657
	B	7936	794	1297	2145
	C	2560	256	418	692
	D	900	90	147	243
	E	8060	806	1317	2178
	F	3720	372	608	1005
	G	1140	114	186	308
	H	1140	114	186	308
	I	2280	228	373	616
	J	180	18	29	49
	K	160	16	26	43
	L	700	70	114	189
	M	350	35	57	95
	N	902	90	147	244
	O	301	30	49	81
	$\chi$	2184	218	357	590
	$\sigma$	2576	258	421	696
	<b>Total</b>		<b>3276</b>	<b>5353</b>	<b>8854</b>

**Table 2.** Capacity estimates for the plazas discussed in the text (© Authors).

\* Does not include Plaza-C (5750 m<sup>2</sup>) also called Plaza Mayor (main open square).



**Figure 2.** Plan map of Cerro Blanco showing the central plaza, surrounding platforms, and excavated areas (© K. Shibata).

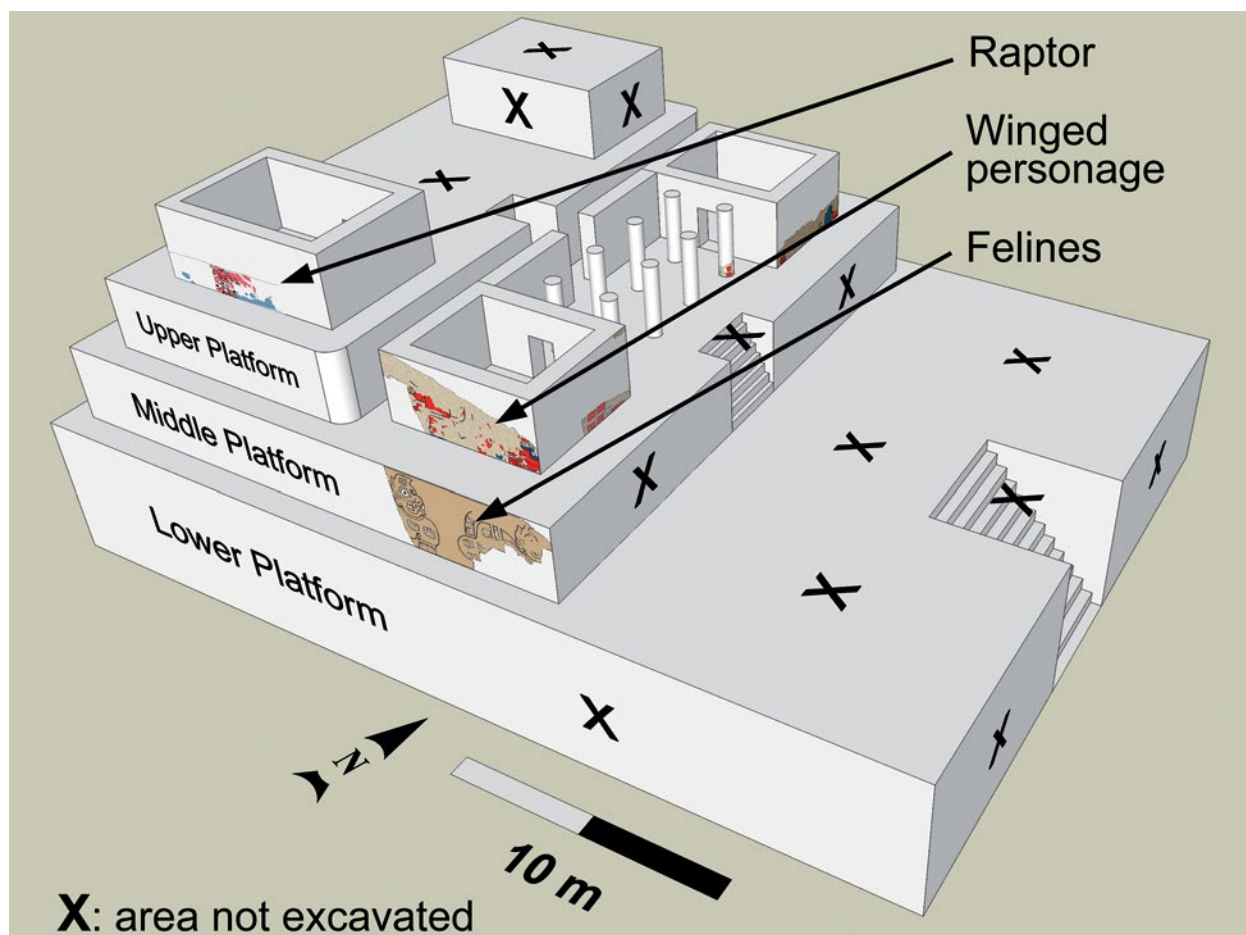


Figure 3. Isometric reconstruction of the mound architecture and wall paintings and friezes at Huaca Partida (© K. Shibata).

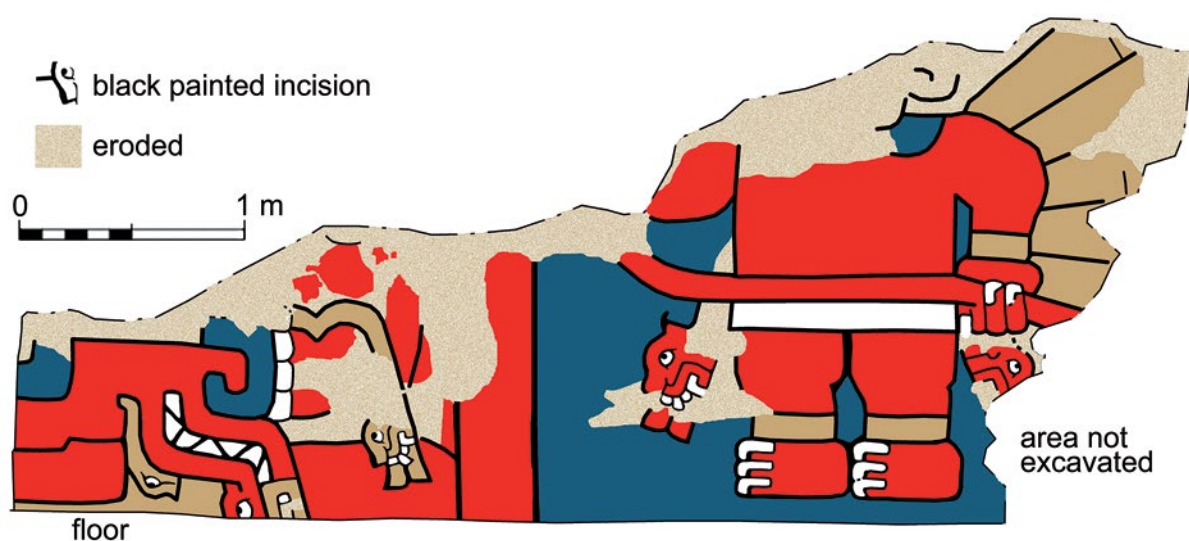


Figure 4. Anthropomorphic winged personage documented along the walls of the Huaca Partida mound exterior walls (© K. Shibata).



directly accessible from the east, without any gateway or other device to control movement. The plaza was easily accessible to visitors who could have come from areas beyond the immediate vicinity of the ceremonial complex. While Cerro Blanco was clearly the center of large festivals, processions and communal gatherings, the geographic scale of the settlement's catchment area is unclear (e.g., local, areal, regional, global; see Sallnow 1987: 4). Public artworks documented at the nearby temple of Huaca Partida suggest some ideological, visual and artistic affiliations with the Cupisnique culture and Chavín sphere of influence (Shibata 2017). Although no surviving trace of a clearly defined plaza has been found at Huaca Partida, it is noteworthy that the visibility of friezes embedded in the outer perimeter walls (Chicoine et al. 2017) indicates an open accessibility similar to that of Cerro Blanco.

Andean performances do not happen as stationary events, and movement is critical to performative events (see Mendoza 2000; Moore 2005, 2006). Moore (2005: 116) has posited that Middle Formative groups, more than any other Andean time period, had a fascination with creating axial space and “literally designing a site around such dynamic displays,” especially on the coast. Human depictions in ancient Andean iconography are frequently shown in side profile emphasizing human motion, and often portray music, dance, and procession in conjunction with one another (e.g., Bolaños 1988: fig. 4-5; Moore 2005: fig. 4.4; Donnan 1982; Donnan and McClelland 1999: fig. 4.29, 4.31, 4.83, 4.84). In Nepeña, U-shaped centers with their central plaza, axial layout, and open access, reinforce this observation. It is particularly significant that painted mural friezes at Huaca Partida display the procession of felines in combination with anthropomorphic beings (Figure 4).

Correspondences in visual arts—in particular composite felines, raptorial birds, caimans, therianthropic beings, and other supernatural themes—point toward connections with the Chavín and Cupisnique phenomena in the north-central highlands and north coast, respectively (Shibata 2017). As pointed out by several scholars (Burger and Salazar-Burger 1998; Cordy-Collins 1977; Rick 2005; Roe 1982; Rowe 1967; Urton 1996), Middle Formative visual arts—including those of the Chavín, Cupisnique, and Manchay cultures—often emphasized ecstatic performances including shamanic transformations, hallucinatory vision quests, and other elite-centered ritual actions. Those have been interpreted in relation to mythographies and used to reconstruct ancient world-views (e.g., Bortoluzzi 2005; Shibata 2017). The sacred imageries associated with plaza settings at Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida contrasts markedly with settings documented at later Formative settlements discussed below. This shift is concomitant in the rejection, abandonment and/or avoidance of Chavín and Cupisnique supernatural imagery, and the development of more abstract, geometric forms of public artworks and architectural sculptures,

many of these found in association with plaza settings (Chicoine 2006, 2010a; Chicoine and Ikehara 2014; Helmer et al. 2012). We explore the profound sociopolitical implications of those changes below.

## LATE-FINAL FORMATIVE PERIOD: CAYLÁN

Caylán (600-200 cal. BC) is located just 5 km west of Cerro Blanco. Its dense nucleus of stonewall enclosures of more than 50 ha makes Caylán the largest settlement in the Nepeña Valley. The complex lies on a pampa (130 masl), tucked between the V-shaped hills of Cerro Caylán some 15 km from the coast. The urban core of the site is comprised of more than 40 multifamily residential compounds in which each is organized around a monumental benched plaza, a series of colonnaded patios, and smaller roofed areas (Figure 5). A number of low mounds dot the site core and complement the plazas. Some plazas display ornate built-in clay friezes and decorated rectangular pillars. The iconographic and symbolic contents of the architectural sculptures contrast markedly with the representations documented at Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida. The Caylán imagery is for the most part abstract and geometric, and avoid the therianthropic visuals of the Chavín and Cupisnique traditions. Overall, this suggests very different ontologies and politico-religious practices at play. Shifts in the geographic locations of plazas reinforce this assertion. At Caylán, plazas are embedded within apartment-like residential compounds and are interpreted as communal courtyards. More than 40 residential walled compounds, each with one or more plazas, have so far been documented.

Plaza spaces appear to have played a critical role in “neighborhood” gatherings at the smaller and fragmented compound level, and are associated ritual performances (Chicoine and Ikehara 2010, 2014; Helmer et al. 2012; Helmer and Chicoine 2013). Excavations of associated refuse indicate musical performance and food consumption, as well as mobile craft production, such as weaving. The restricted access to plaza spaces contrast with the Cerro Blanco case. Entrances to neighborhood plazas were tightly controlled through sophisticated systems of corridors, baffled entryways, and door locks. In many areas, corridors were scarcely over a meter wide, and would extend through several 180 degree turns over distances surpassing 100 meters in some cases.

Based on surface architecture 43 plazas have so far been identified, delimited, and measured at Caylán. With the exception of an open main square, all plazas are embedded within residential compounds, and have varying numbers of platform areas surrounding plaza walls, which could have served as benched seating areas (Figure 6, next pages). Plazas vary in surface area between 85 and 5318 m<sup>2</sup>, with an average of 1065 m<sup>2</sup> ( $\sigma = 917$ ). The size of the plazas is directly linked to the overall size of the



associated compound. With its 5750 m<sup>2</sup>, the main square stands out as the largest plaza at the site. It contrasts with the neighborhood plazas embedded within residential compounds by its size and openness. Indeed, it is interpreted as the central carrier space for Caylán's system of streets and articulated most movements of people at the site level. Excavations of a test pit in the center of the plaza revealed the presence of a layer of small stone cobbles interpreted as a pavement. This contrasts with the plastered clay floors documented at the residential plazas. Considering the different nature, dimensions, and function of the main square, it appears to have integrated inhabitants at the settlement level. The benched plazas within the multifamily compounds, meanwhile, served as settings for ceremonial gatherings at smaller household levels.

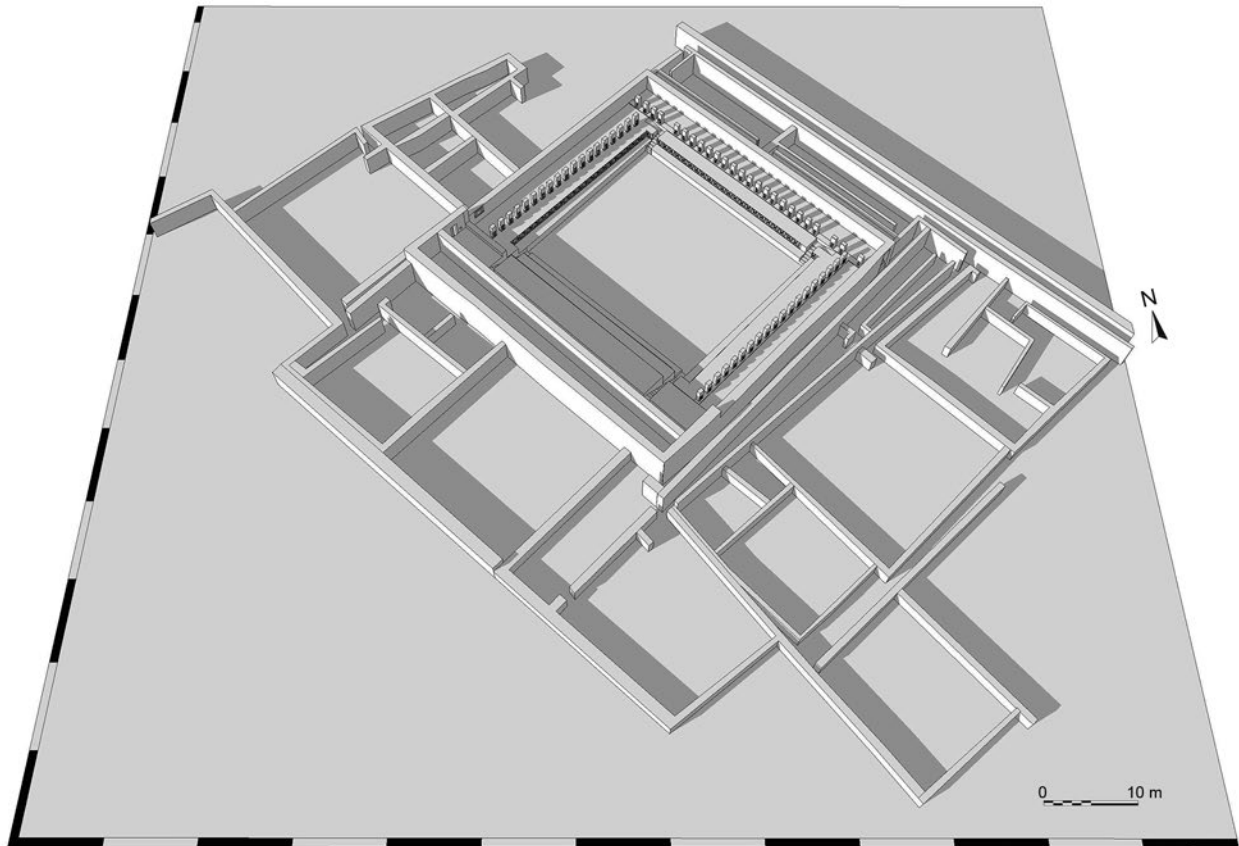
The residential plazas currently delimited at Caylán could have together hosted approximately 12,378 visitors, if each plaza was being utilized simultaneously at the aforementioned rate of 3.7 m<sup>2</sup> per person. The average capacity of each plaza would be approximately 300 individuals. Sometimes, the interior façades of the platform benches are ornamented with sculpted clay friezes representing geometric abstract designs (Figure 7, next page). Overall, plazas at Caylán are organized around a dichotomy between an open, amphitheater-like area, and a colonnaded, roofed platform area. In the case of Plaza-A, one of Caylán's better preserved plazas, side benches raised up to more than five meters with four distinct levels for spectators to presumably sit and witness the activities taking place in the open center, or pass in zigzagging procession across the various levels (see Helmer et al. 2012).

Visual arts within plaza settings emphasize the interplay of light and shadow through geometric abstract designs, rather than representational forms. It is significant to note that substantial engineering efforts were made to enclose and hide the activities carried out within the plazas. Indeed, the inside of the plazas was invisible to people outside due to walls standing over 10 meters high in many cases. Sound tests at Plaza-A have revealed a similar preoccupation with trapping sound and making plaza gatherings exclusive events (see Helmer and Chicoine 2013). Patterns of access indicate two-way, maze-like motion as a key component to experiencing public spectacles, rather than axial movements seen at earlier centers such as Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida. Compound residents also had to pass through interior colonnaded patios which could have served as starting points for processions. Clearly, the built environment at Caylán created a series of zigzagging trajectories that contrast with earlier axial or linear processions at earlier mound-plaza centers.

Excavations at two plazas (Plaza-A, Plaza-E) provide material references to Caylán's exclusive built settings (Chicoine and Ikehara 2014). Excavations at Plaza-A sampled 176 m<sup>2</sup> and yielded a series of artifacts including a large number of pottery fragments ( $n = 7528$ ) representing a vast array of vessel forms (i.e., jars, bowls, bottles) and decorative styles (i.e., White-on-Red, Stamped Circle-and-Dot, Pattern-Burnished, Textile-Impressed, Zoned Punctate, Incised-Appiqué). Other remains found at Plaza-A include colorful bird feathers, turquoise and Spondylus beads, broken panpipes, blue-and-beige cotton textiles, as well as stone flakes, cores, projectiles, grindstones, mace heads, and quartz fragments. Overall, the



Figure 5. Caylán plan map showing the location of Plaza-A and surrounding compounds (© D. Chicoine).



**Figure 6.** Isometric reconstruction of Plaza-A and surrounding architecture at Caylán (© M. Helmer).



**Figure 7.** Stepped geometric friezes and column lining the platform benches at Plaza-A, Caylán (© D. Chicoine).



artifact assemblage suggests a broader range of activities associated with the potential multivocality of Caylán's plazas. This is likely linked to the location of plazas within residential compounds. From that standpoint, plazas could have served as complementary or supplementary open spaces for domestic and other productive activities of the Caylán households.

In sum, research at Caylán suggests that plaza settings were exclusive, semi-public spaces embedded within house compounds of variable size, wealth, and socio-political influence. At the scale of the settlement, plazas were spaces of convergence for multiple—and probably exclusive—social groups.

#### LATE-FINAL FORMATIVE PERIOD: HUAMBACHO

The site of Huambacho (600-200 cal. BC) is located on the southern margin of the river, some 8 km from the coast (65 masl) (Chicoine 2010b). The original extension of the site spanned some 12 ha with 8 ha of preserved architecture still standing. Based on the architectural features and material culture found during excavations, Huambacho appears to be a small elite center associated with the hinterlands of the urban settlement of Caylán

(Chicoine 2006, 2010a; Chicoine and Ikehara 2010). Huambacho originally had two enclosures on the valley floor; however, only one stands today (Main Compound) (Figure 8). As at Caylán, entrances are constructed in a zigzagging fashion, and their access is indirect. The Main Compound is subdivided into two distinct spaces, each dominated by a benched plaza. Plazas are associated with the use of complexes of raised colonnaded patio rooms. The raised areas had their façades decorated with geometric clay friezes illustrating similar light/shadow dichotomies in public art. The plazas are accessed by baffled corridors and zigzagging entryways and are adjacent to more exclusive feasting halls (see Chicoine 2011). The feasting halls are typically arranged as colonnaded patios similar to those documented at Caylán.

Our analysis focuses on two plazas (Plaza-A, Plaza-B), each covering areas of 6084 and 3304m<sup>2</sup>, respectively. A third plaza appears to have existed in the North Compound, nowadays destroyed. Plaza-A and Plaza-B lay adjacent to each other within the Main Compound. Together, they could have welcomed approximately 2,500 visitors. Both spaces are organized similarly, with four benched sides standing more than two meters above their respective central, open areas. The benches themselves were decorated with elaborate clay friezes and

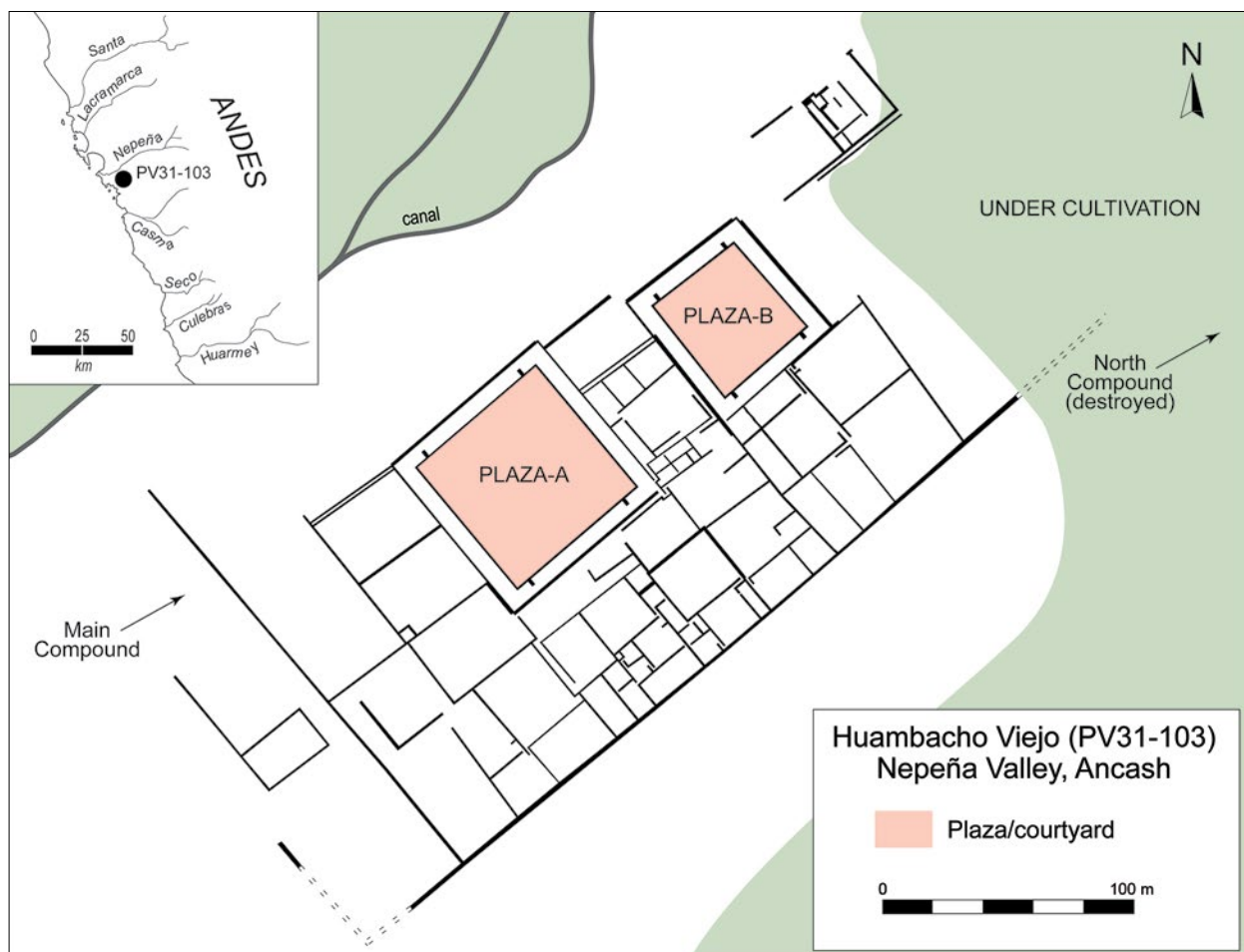


Figure 8. Huambacho plan map showing plazas and surrounding compounds (© D. Chicoine).

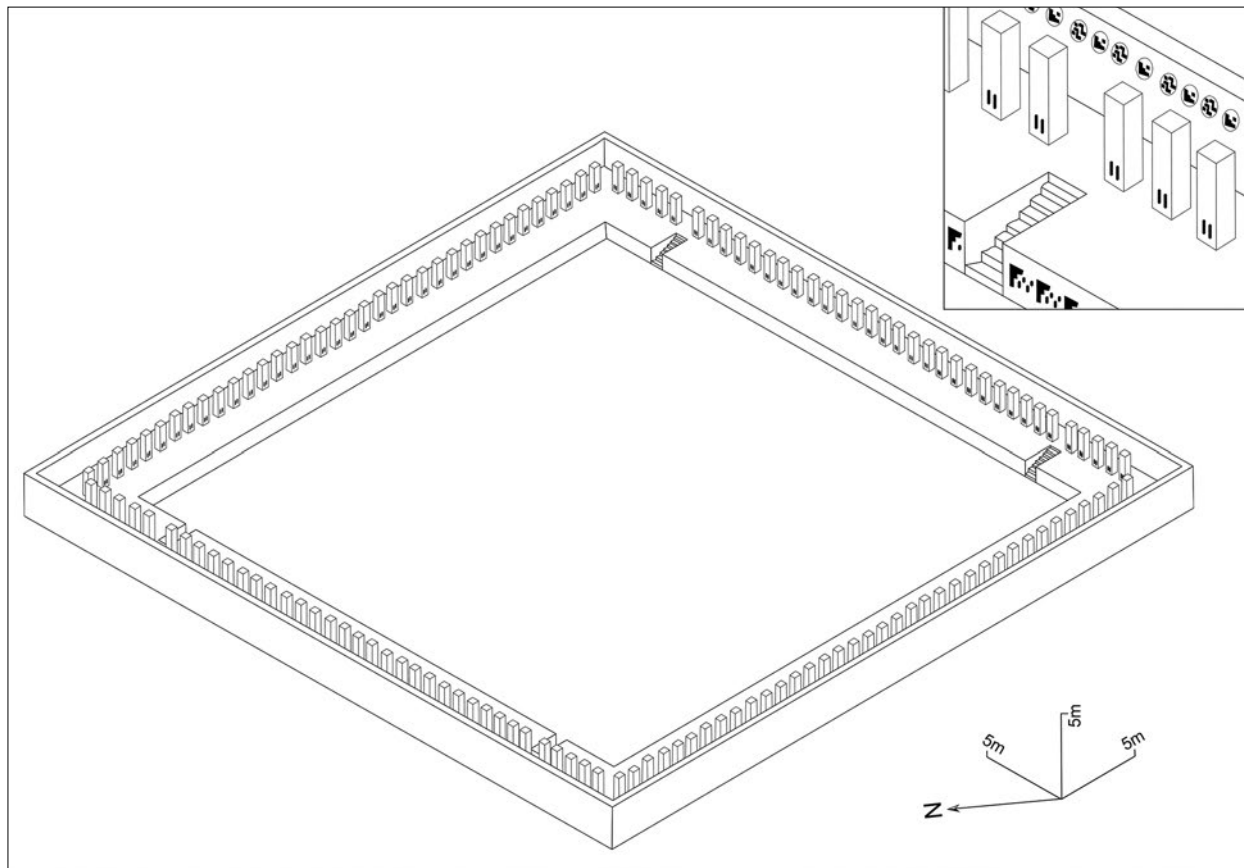


Figure 9. Isometric reconstruction of Plaza-A at Huambacho (© D. Chicoine and Jeisen Navarro).

sculpted cones set into the upper portions of the walls and roof superstructures (Figure 9, Figure 10).

Excavations at Plaza-A sampled 385 m<sup>2</sup> for more than 5% of the total surface area of the plaza. Meanwhile, excavations at Plaza-B sampled 188 m<sup>2</sup> for less than 6% of the plaza area. At Plaza-A, in association with structure debris and floor features, primary context remains include a complete stirrup-spout bottle, *Spondylus* shell beads and pendants, as well as hundreds of broken serving vessels of variable quality and fineness (i.e., bottles, jars, bowls, plates). Other ceramic artifacts include panpipes, sherd disks or tokens. Other remains include red mineral pigment, stone hammers, polishers, beads/pendants, cordage, as well as gourd containers and covers. Similar assemblages were recovered from Plaza-B, albeit in lesser diversity, quality, and quantity.

Overall, the dimensions and limited number of plazas at Huambacho align well with the localized nature of the ceremonial gatherings. With the exception of the absence of a large and open main square, the plaza settings replicate the data from Caylán at a smaller scale.

## FINAL FORMATIVE PERIOD: SAMANCO

Samanco (500-100 cal. BC) is analogous to Huambacho and Caylán in architectural design and material assemblage (Helmer 2015). It is located 1 km from the coast (40 masl), and is the closest settlement to the Pacific Ocean in our sample.



Figure 10. Sculpted clay cones from Plaza-A at Huambacho (© D. Chicoine).

The site contains six separate enclosure compound areas totaling hundreds of agglutinated rectangular

rooms including plazas, colonnaded patios, animal corrals, and smaller domestic structures. Samanco is nestled within ravines and hillsides, much like Caylán, along the northern margin of the Nepeña River, near the Bahía de Samanco. The center is approximately 40 ha in extent, with a 20 ha dense architectural core (Figure 11). Samanco contrasts with Huambacho and Caylán through its extensive use of terracing above the pampa and into the hillsides, with a general separation of 25 m in elevation between lower and upper structures.

Samanco has one major plaza (Plaza Mayor) measuring approximately 1500 m<sup>2</sup> with wide terraced platform benches on three sides and two terraced open courtyards (Figure 12), which could have housed approximately 450 visitors. Elsewhere at Samanco, dozens of colonnaded patios are located within residential compounds with similar material and architectural signatures to the Plaza Mayor, albeit at a less monumental scale. Several of these colonnaded patios were excavated at Compounds 2 and 3 (Figure 11).

The Plaza Mayor is located at the uppermost extent of the site (70 masl), abutting the hillsides on top of a series of terraces. It is closely aligned with an enclosure compound on its eastern end, and appears to have been encircled by elongated colonnaded rooms typical at the site. Based on architectural features, ceramic styles, and radiocarbon assays (Helmer 2015), Samanco's Plaza Mayor corresponds mainly to the Samanco Phase of the Nepeña Valley.

Excavations at the Plaza Mayor yielded materials conducive to both general public and ritual use. These include hundreds of panpipe fragments and various decorated ceramics including Salinar style White-on-Red, Janabarriu Stamped Circle-Dot, probably associated with the final stages of Chavín (Kembel and Haas 2015; Mesía 2007; Rick et al. 2011), and local styles such as Zoned Punctate and Textile Impressed designs. Large *tinaja* jars, some which were largely complete, were also located in the plaza fill along its western perimeter. Additionally, dense food remains were recovered including butchered camelids and dogs, fish remains, and maize refuse. High volumes of textiles and weaving instruments were also recovered. On the floors of the platform benches camelid droppings and corn kernels provide clues into plaza use where food and animals may have taken part in public gatherings.

Excavations indicate that the Plaza Mayor was probably built as a single phase late in Samanco's occupation atop earlier colonnaded patios. It may have been quickly constructed without the characteristic sculpted friezes found in similar plazas at Caylán and Huambacho. The absence of earlier monumental plazas at Samanco is puzzling. This lends weight to the idea that colonnaded patios were transformed into plazas over time. Their use may have been similar, with plazas becoming venues to promote or galvanize family or corporate groups through the renovation of patios with monumental qualities (i.e., benches, high walls, murals).

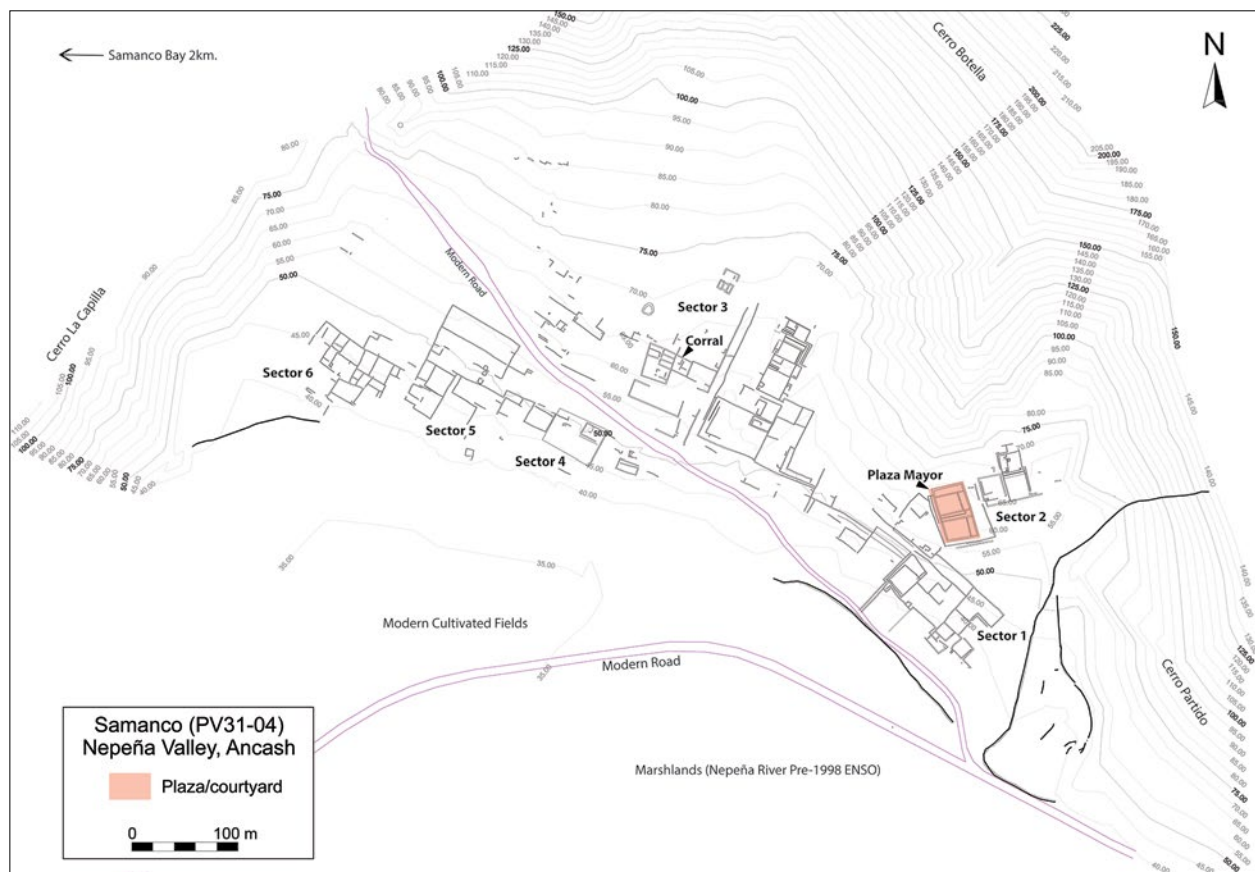


Figure 11. Plan map of Samanco with Plaza Mayor and excavated compounds labeled (© M. Helmer).



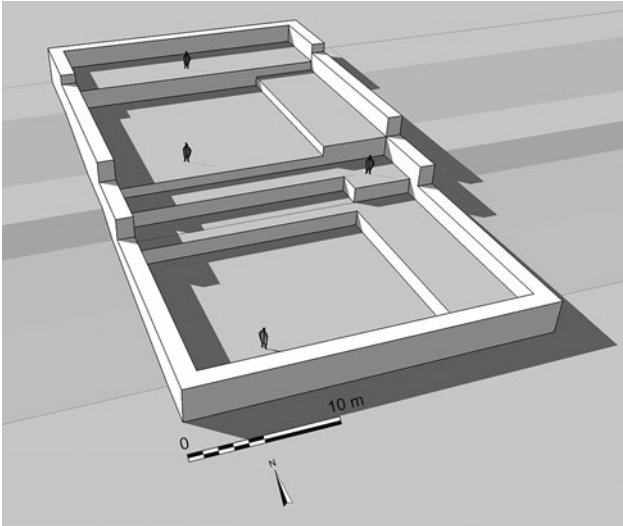


Figure 12. Isometric reconstruction of the Plaza Mayor at Samanco (© M. Helmer).

## FINAL FORMATIVE PERIOD: KUSHIPAMPA

The middle section of the Nepeña valley is characterized by a widening of the arable plain. This area is enclosed within ridges and hills where river tributaries intersect. It is commonly known as the “Moro Pocket.” Based on survey data (Daggett 1984, 1987; Ikehara 2016; Proulx 1968, 1973, 1985), this area witnessed a particularly dense occupation during the Final Formative, or Samanco Phase, after 500 BC. We interpret middle

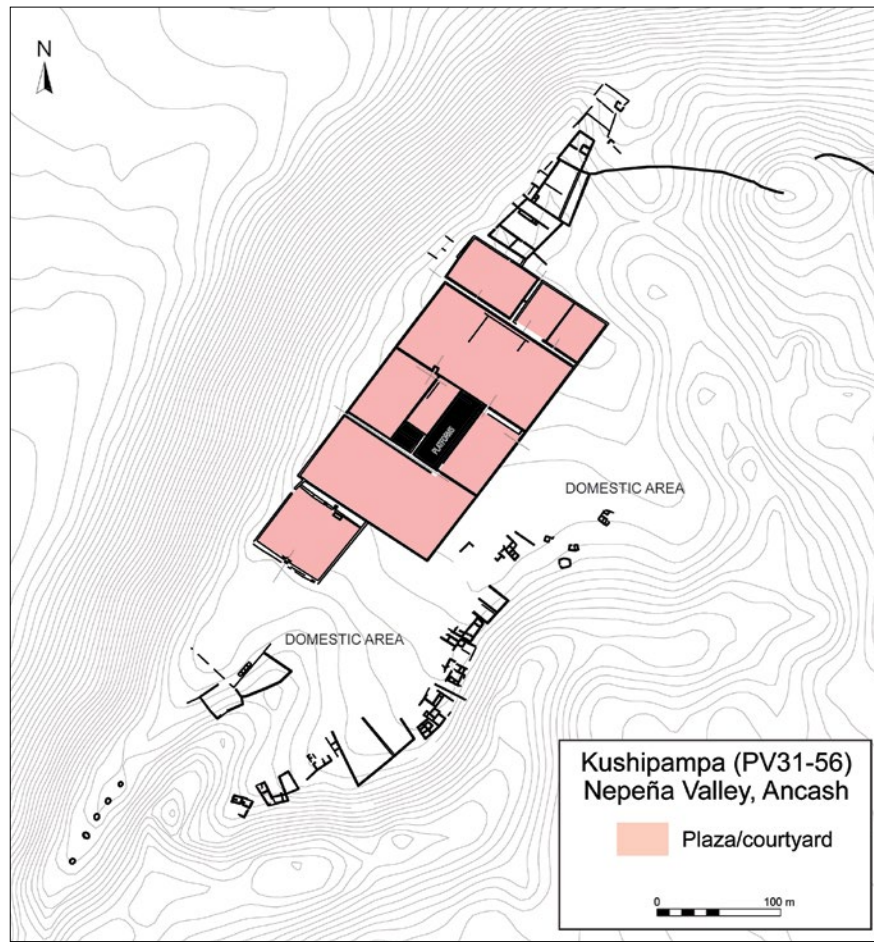
valley centers as competing political entities (Ikehara and Chicoine 2011). Their rivalry may have included vectors of violence, exchange and possibly an eventual sociopolitical integration (Ikehara 2016). Here we focus on the center of Kushipampa where Ikehara (2010b) conducted test excavations and surface collections.

Kushipampa’s architecture, with an extent of 25 ha, is typical of a style known as “Megalithic Architecture” (Daggett 1983; Ikehara 2010b) and was built over an alluvial terrace at 600 masl in a narrow section of the valley. The site has an orthogonal arrangement. It is clear that the layout was the result of subsequent divisions of the space defined by large perimeter walls, standing as high as 4 m (Figure 13). In contrast with the contemporary settlements in the lower valley, Kushipampa is organized as a single monumental core with nine large plazas laid out in three separate sections surrounded by small constructions and plazas, as well as domestic areas (Figure 14). In terms of plaza settings, the spatial organization points towards the importance of sequentially organized, rather than simultaneous events. This also suggests the significance of axial movement, re-emphasizing the contrasts with coeval lower valley settlements where movement is more tightly controlled through narrow baffled corridors.

At Kushipampa multiple contiguous plazas indicate the potential flow of people during ceremonies (Figure 15). The most private areas were dominated by platforms measuring 4-5 m high supported by megalithic walls,



Figure 13. Kushipampa’s megalithic architecture. Corner stands approximately 4 m high (© D. Chicoine).



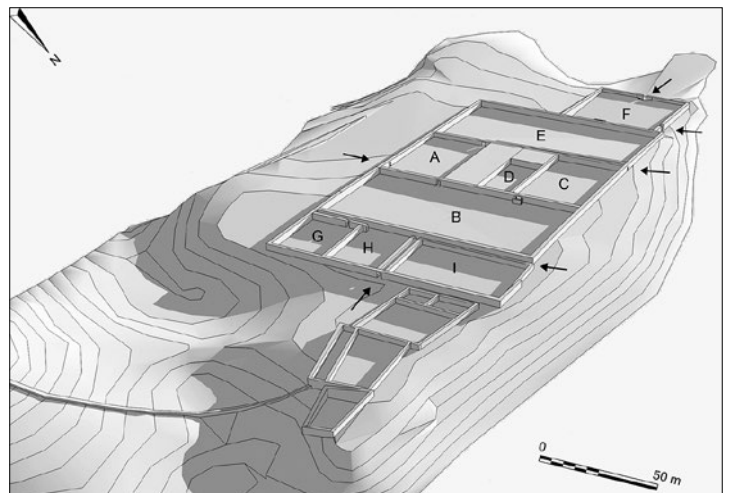
**Figure 14.** Plan reconstruction of Kushipampa, illustrating the plazas discussed in the text (© H. Ikehara).

filled with cobbles. Their exact function is not currently known. During excavations, the platforms yielded no activity remains and their walls bear no evidence of elaborate decoration. The sophisticated finish of the megalithic rocks, especially in the doorways and corners, points towards their use without any further surface treatment (Ikehara 2010b).

A total of 15 plazas (large and small) have so far been identified at Kushipampa ranging from 301 to 8060 m<sup>2</sup> in surface area, with an average of 2184 m<sup>2</sup> ( $\sigma = 2576$ ). Based on the 3.7 persons per square meter capacity ratio used in this article (see Ikehara 2015 for different capacity estimate), Kushipampa plazas could have hosted nearly 9000 people if all the plazas were used at the same time. If only the largest two plazas were used simultaneously, plaza capacity would be approximately 4200 people.

The northwest slope, outside the perimeter wall, was identified as a dumping area for the ceremonies carried out in the plazas (Ikehara 2010b). Associated material remains include bottles, neck jars, bowls, neckless ollas, and hemispheric bowls. Oversized jars, or *tinajas*, are notably absent from the plaza corpus, but their remains can be found at the surface of the plaza southwest from the monumental core. Camelid and marine shell remains were identified in the limited excavations of domestic refuse. Animal remains are also present at the surface of the slopes adjacent the megalithic complex, indicating

that residents deposited refuse immediately outside the walls of the monumental plazas.



**Figure 15.** Isometric reconstruction of megalithic architecture at Kushipampa, illustrating most of the areas discussed (© H. Ikehara).

## DISCUSSION

The data analyzed in this article allow for a consideration of plaza settings and contexts of public performance at six Formative Period settlements in the Nepeña Valley. Our comparative analysis allows for the



evaluation of plaza settings through nearly a millennium of development within Nepeña. These results also speak to the various meanings laden within architecture and associated public art. Architectural spaces such as the plazas analyzed here are built to communicate particular meanings ascribed by designers, but those meanings are shifted and fluid as spaces are interacted with and shaped by various contexts of human use (Rapoport 1982: 15).

Building on Rapoport's concept of setting, the data from Formative Nepeña allows us to discuss the fixed architectural layouts of plazas, their semifixed furniture such as wall decorations, and nonportable elements including audience sizes, consumption goods, and ritual paraphernalia. Insights from the different feature elements—because of various degrees of permanence, symbolic meanings, and stability—can inform on scales and historical timelines of religio-political shifts. These insights range from non-fixed elements and inter-personal interactions to larger-scale, more fixed, and hence structurally constraining canons of religious architecture. From that standpoint, historical trajectories of plaza usages (see Swenson 2011) hint at shifting meanings of public gatherings and their relation to forms of collective action and religio-political authority.

By looking at the location of plazas within each site, their size, internal organization, estimated audience sizes, and visual arts, as well as associated material remains, three major trends emerge: (1) single, open plazas fronting a central mound typical of the Cerro Blanco Phase (1100-800 BC) and exemplified at the ceremonial centers of Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida, (2) residential or neighborhood plazas nested within walled compounds as seen at Caylán, Huambacho and Samanco, and (3) megalithic plazas with a graded access as exemplified at Kushipampa associated with cultural developments in the middle valley. In addition to suggesting major transformations during the local Nepeña Phase (800-450 BC), the results indicate significant geographic differences in the levels of sociopolitical integration between the lower and middle valleys, especially during the Samanco Phase (450-150 BC).

In terms of access, Cerro Blanco Phase plazas in Nepeña were generally larger, open, and easily accessible. These open air gathering spaces fronted platform mounds furnished with spectacular polychrome sculptures. Their location and organization suggests that processions to-and-from staircases leading to atria and chambers located on the summit of the temple platforms. The central plaza at Cerro Blanco is open and easily accessible, primarily from up-valley. It could have easily welcomed close to 1000 people, with more crowded estimates in the 2000s. A lack of nearby domestic architecture suggests that the site was intended primarily for use by multiple neighboring communities and outsiders, as attested to by the variety of non-local and non-domestic material remains documented through excavation. Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida likely occupied a special place

in the ritual topography of the Middle Formative Period, as exemplified by the broadcast of religious imagery in wall decorations and perhaps other semifixed feature elements that have yet to be documented archaeologically (e.g., tapestries, roof adornments). These temples were likely embedded in networks of religious pilgrimages, festivals, and collective ceremonies.

Another trend is seen at Caylán, Huambacho, and Samanco. Here, plazas and patios are numerous and enclosed within larger architectural compounds. At Caylán, benched plazas are nested within house compounds of different sizes, scales, and levels of internal complexity. Yet, the constant seems to be the presence of a plaza to mediate between the outside/public and the inside/private residential spaces. Indeed, to access different residential sectors, one must pass through central patios and plazas via long winding corridors. At Caylán, the dual presence of a main square and more than 40 neighborhood plazas attest to the existence of two levels of gathering and ceremonial spaces. One was designed to host events at the scale of the whole settlement, while the neighborhood plazas were likely limited to smaller-scale group-oriented events. With respect to nonfixed feature elements, proxemic data indicate plazas designed to host smaller audiences and provide more intimate inter-personal interactions.

It is unclear how public interactions were structured by the canonical messages transmitted by the architectural sculptures, but preliminary observations on the friezes and their abstract geometric designs suggests the rejection or avoidance of therianthropic themes common at earlier monuments. Considering that Chavín and Cupisnique art emphasized shared canons of shamanic transformations, visions, and other ecstatic performances, the shift to more abstract and geometric forms could be interpreted as a decentralization of sacred iconographies in a context of increased cultural differentiation as well as the decline of the Chavín pantheon in this region. In the case of lower Nepeña's plazas, varying geometric figures seen in each plaza may have articulated and perhaps materialized the identity of the different co-resident groups.

With respect to nonfixed feature elements, plazas at Caylán could have easily welcomed 4500 people, with space for as many as 12000. Yet, using the capacity estimate of 3.7 people/m<sup>2</sup>, Caylán plazas were designed for groups averaging approximately 250-300 people, and public space was fragmented between the more than 40 plazas. These estimates highlight the fragmented and more exclusive nature of plaza gatherings and contexts of performance at Caylán. As opposed to primarily ceremonial and exotic material culture, Caylán's plazas exhibit a mix of domestic and ritual materials. Therefore, while the ornate and monumental qualities of the plazas may have been designed to convey religious meanings and exclusivity, the reality of plaza use at Caylán was as a multivocal public residential space utilized for day-to-day, as well as episodic public festive gatherings.

In terms of sociopolitical values, this may also reflect a decentralization of religious and public life away from large integrative gatherings and toward fragmented public lifeways as settlements became more dense, residentially complex, and socially diverse.

Plazas at Huambacho follow a similar concept, yet their number is limited to two as the site appears to have had a smaller, elite residential center function (see Chicoine 2010a). With capacity estimates roughly between 1000 and 2500 people, plazas at Huambacho were designed for larger crowds than what is seen at Caylán. Their limited number also indicate larger integrative events. Here, smaller, more exclusive gatherings were realized in the adjacent patios interpreted as feasting halls. At both Caylán and Huambacho, plazas could have been used simultaneously by neighboring groups. The plazas are complemented by smaller colonnaded patios interpreted as more private and exclusive feasting halls (i.e., Huambacho) and domestic, residential areas (i.e., Caylán).

Meanwhile the Plaza Mayor at Samanco, although centrally located and visible from most areas across the settlement, is enclosed. It is organized as a series of terraces and platforms connected through an intricate graded access. Overall, the Plaza Mayor is similar in size to Caylán's plazas, and was designed for similar numbers of participants, most likely under 500. From that standpoint, the plaza could have acted more as a communal space for select members of the community and associated guests. Samanco contains dozens of less monumental open patios of slightly smaller sizes embedded within compounds which likely served similar functions to Caylán's plazas given similarities in material remains. The relative lack of monumental plazas at Samanco could be related to the more industrial functions of the settlement as a marine resource production center (see Helmer 2015). Here, groups might have travelled to the larger center of Caylán or to Huambacho for episodic festivals, while colonnaded patios served for more regular domestic gatherings and rituals at the site level.

At Kushipampa, in contrast, plaza settings are hierarchically organized abutting one another without separate domestic areas; suggesting a sequential use of the different spaces during festivals. The graded nature of the access system in association with enclosed plazas indicates a similar desire to fragment contexts of public performance. Based on the size and number of plazas at Kushipampa, the site was designed to impress and broadcast a sense of incomparable scale and prosperity. Little is known at the moment on semifixed feature elements, especially since no *in situ* stone sculptures or other wall decorations were recovered. With respect to nonfixed feature elements, megalithic plaza settings at Kushipampa were clearly designed to impress and overwhelm potential visitors and festival-goers. Considering the dozen contemporary settlements in the Moro area, the apparent inter-community tension, and likely territorial division of the arable land, it is unlikely that the Kushipampa

plazas were designed only for local use at the site level (Ikehara 2010b). Rather, the monumentality and scale align better with ideas of conspicuous consumption and the desire to compete with rival communities through large public gatherings.

In sum, plazas and patios at Caylán, Huambacho, Samanco, and Kushipampa suggest the enactment of multiple—in some cases simultaneous and in others sequential—contexts of performance. Here settings contrast with the single plazas at Cerro Blanco and similar Middle-Late Formative mound-plaza complexes. Cerro Blanco stands on its own with an open plaza flanked by three mound structures, some of which were painted with elaborate polychrome friezes of felines and theriomorphs. The presence of smaller lateral mounds filled with feasting refuse indicates multiple ceremonial spaces, analogous to the replicated plazas seen later. Yet, the focus was on a single integrative plaza where members of different, likely non-local communities met and engaged in ritual interactions. Here, the presence of canonical messages associated with the Chavín and Cupisnique religious ideologies could have strengthened social cohesion and reinforced the authority of religio-political leaders. The abandonment of the Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida religious complexes around 450 BC was significant as it marked a shift towards a decentralization and fragmentation of the plaza landscape. It is unclear along what lines (e.g., kinship, socioeconomic status, political affiliation) plaza gatherings were fragmented, but this decentralization during the Late and Final Formative contrasts markedly with the integrative potential of the Cerro Blanco plaza during the Middle Formative.

More research is needed, but we suggest that the dissolution of the Chavín-Cupisnique religious tradition contributed to shifts in public settings as reflected in both the fragmentation of plazas as well as the disappearance of therianthropic public art. Visual arts in the lower valley shifted from composite felines and other polychrome supernatural representations to abstract geometric forms emphasizing depth and shadows. At Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida, murals are located along the facades of mounds and temples, whereas later murals are located along plaza platform benches and mounted clay cones, designed for group viewing. Friezes were designed to be viewed by group members and their guests directly using the plaza. This contrasts with patterns of painted murals and monumental friezes at previous Middle Formative sites including Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida. Here friezes are designed to broadcast religious ideas and symbols beyond the immediate surroundings and limited plaza users. In any case, the friezes are not enclosed; rather, they project messages to a large audience. While wall decorations and other semifixed feature elements can be modified rather rapidly, and without the destruction, reconstruction and complete redesign of architectural layouts, in Nepeña, shifts in public artworks do appear to coincide with deeper transformations in the fixed feature elements and designs

of public spaces. More data are needed on other semifixed and nonfixed feature elements including graffiti art, tapestries, clothing, and other ritual paraphernalia.

Higher up in the valley, groups in the Moro area appear to have avoided altogether canonical messages within built plaza settings. Evidence for other Final Formative public art elsewhere in the coastal Andes is scant, and therefore, it is difficult to surmise the extent to which religious beliefs changed during the Late and Final Formative Period. However, it is abundantly clear that the *mise-en-scène* created by plaza architects and enacted by participants witnessed a marked shift toward more exclusive and fragmented public venues. Yet, those would have overwhelmed visitors by the scale of the masonry and of the audiences.

Finally, with respect to associated remains—although the samples excavated at each site have different representative potentials—it appears that all plazas were venues for the ritual consumption of food and drink. In the case of the lower valley sites, music is more visible through the high volume of broken ceramic panpipes recovered (see Helmer and Chicoine 2013). The refuse management at Kushipampa varies with patterns of rubbish collection and use at Caylán and Huambacho. In the lower valley the trash produced during feasts was channeled to fill chambers associated with plaza renovation (mainly additions of terraced benches/platforms, raising of structures). Here, the feasting refuse and offerings placed within the platforms served as indices of plaza gatherings. In the case of Kushipampa, refuse appears to have been dumped directly outside plaza walls and into ravines around the periphery of the site. In both cases, there was a conscious effort to keep plaza spaces clean and tidy, a pattern which is not reflected in domestic contexts at each site. At Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida, refuse densities are much lighter, further highlighting the non-residential nature of these sites.

In terms of sociopolitical organization, demographic shifts during the first millennium BC toward larger and denser residential settlements undoubtedly contributed to shifts in plaza life, in addition to the aforementioned dissolution of Chavín-Cupisnique. Sites such as Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida appear geared toward large integrative events emphasizing procession, pilgrimage, and the open broadcast of public events and religious iconography. After their abandonment, sites in the upper valley such as Kushipampa conform to the “inward” group-oriented design of fragmented plazas. Yet the scale of the plazas suggests they served very large numbers of people. Here, each community would have maintained and gathered at a large plaza enclosed within the monumental complex. In the lower valley, communities (at the site-level) were more broadly integrated at the regional level into perhaps a hierarchical system: Caylán > Samanco > Huambacho, with Caylán serving as a major proto-urban center. However, at Caylán, as well as the smaller satellites, each extended family group

built, maintained, used, and renovated independent—and perhaps multiple—nested/enclosed/semi-public plazas and patios. The diversity in the dimensions of the plazas point toward the existence of groups of various sizes and potentially varying socioeconomic statuses. At the same time, plazas were likely not strictly built on principles of capacity and exclusivity, but were also undoubtedly built to the specifications of particular ritual content.

More data are needed from the plazas, in particular about potential ancestor-related rituals or burials, but the group-oriented gatherings in the neighborhood plazas were likely tied to the affirmation and reaffirmation of kin solidarity, through events such as initiation rites, weddings, and funerals. There is also compelling evidence for daily communal plaza use, such as craft production. Here, significant architectural features potentially reflecting intra-communal status and success include the number of benches and their respective levels, the presence/absence and intricacy of sculpted clay friezes, and overall plaza monumentality.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The data analyzed in this article suggest a heterogeneous sociopolitical landscape during the Formative Period in the Nepeña Valley of coastal Peru as seen through a detailed analysis of plaza settings at six major sites. This is not surprising considering the millennial time frame covered by our sample size. More specifically, artistic and architectural shifts in plaza settings reflected profound changes in political organization taking place between roughly 800-500 BC. Primary analytical criteria include public arts, material refuse, plaza architecture, and landscape. Nepeña’s Middle Formative or local Cerro Blanco Phase ceremonial centers (1100-800 cal. BC), including Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida, were built as highly visible and easily accessible mound-plaza centers with therianthropic religious imagery associated with the iconic Chavín and Cupisnique worlds. These were large, singular spaces with strong evidence of feasting and procession, which likely operated as religious centers bringing together various communities throughout the Nepeña periphery. As these mound-plaza centers were abandoned around 500 cal. BC, new political forms developed throughout Nepeña. The plaza designs of these new settlements reflect historical and demographic changes, including the dissolution of Chavín-Cupisnique and increased numbers and population densities of archaeological sites. The processes appeared to have fostered the need for distinct ceremonial spaces embedded within residential neighborhoods organized as walled enclosures.

Beginning in the Late Formative or local Nepeña Phase (800-450 cal. BC), and reaching their apex during the Final Formative or local Samanco Phase (400-150 cal. BC), extensive walled enclosure sites developed in the lower valley. Public spaces differed markedly from the previous phase. At Caylán, for instance, plazas are



nested within house compounds and each compound and its associated plaza(s) appear to be used and maintained by relatively small, autonomous family groups. Acoustic studies (Helmer and Chicoine 2013), for example, indicate a particular concern with the creation of exclusive gathering space within monumental plazas nested in residential compounds. Similar patterns are noted across the lower valley at neighboring Samanco and Huambacho, which were coastal satellites of Caylán. The creation of such spaces formalized group-oriented performances and provided a permanent architectural index of kin identity. In the Nepeña Valley, such group-scale, residential ceremonial features were nonfixed and have yet to be documented archaeologically prior to the end of the Nepeña Phase.

In the middle valley, meanwhile, patterns of plaza settings, maintenance and use differ markedly from contemporary developments in the lower valley. In the Moro Pocket region, our knowledge of the Samanco Phase mainly comes from excavations carried out at Kushipampa, as well as settlement pattern studies. At Kushipampa, large megalithic plazas dominate the site and appear to have been designed to host sequences of large-scale communal feasts. Although enclosed within compound walls, these plazas were large enough to welcome all community members as well as visitors with a large, formal access way rather than small baffled entryways seen at the aforementioned lower valley sites. The layout and the architectural features, while more restrictive than earlier mound-plaza sites such as Cerro Blanco, lack the emphasis on exclusivity seen in the lower valley during this time. Rather, plaza designs suggest an emphasis on sequential access and procession through various large megalithic plazas, accommodating much larger numbers of people than lower valley plazas. It is believed that Kushipampa and other middle valley settlements were engaged in higher incidences of competition and warfare, as reflected in an emphasis on ridgetop settlements and enclosed plazas. Therefore, larger megalithic plazas may have been key arenas for the competitive display of power and prestige.

These results speak to the varying symbolic meanings embedded within plaza settings and enacted through public performances. In this case, Nepeña's plazas reflect semiotic emphases such as inclusion, singularity, and broadcast in the Middle Formative examples of Cerro Blanco and Huaca Partida, and exclusion and fragmentation in the Late-Final Formative examples of Samanco, Huambacho, Caylán, and Kushipampa. In some cases, such as the plazas at Caylán, design intentions and realities of use may have varied, as plazas appear to have been used for public festivals and rituals, as well as for daily residential activities and gatherings. Such findings reinforce theoretical considerations of potential conflicts between architectural design and the fluidity of meaning through use.

To conclude, our research in Nepeña confirms the need to investigate plaza settings as essential contexts of public performance and political organization in the central Andes and the ancient Americas more broadly. More data are needed from securely excavated plaza contexts, but the case of Formative Period plazas in Nepeña reinforces the relationship between modes of social integration, religio-political authority, and public, ceremonial gatherings. This study illustrates the utility of excavating contemporary sites of varying scales in order to draw larger, more regional conclusions based on historical trajectories. More broadly, the study illustrates the varying ways public spaces transform as societies grow larger and more stratified, and could be of considerable utility to scholars interested in shifts of social complexity worldwide.

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