

Chiripa: Settlement, History and Ritual in the Titicaca Basin Formative

Matthew S. Bandy, Christine A. Hastorf, Lee H. Steadman
William T. Whitehead, Emily M. Dean, David Kojan, Jose-Luis Paz

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[View of mountains, etc.] The site of Chiripa, located on the southern shores of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia, has been a key site for our developing understanding of the Formative Period of the south-central Andes. Sites with Chiripa ceramics have been reported throughout the Southern Titicaca Basin, and relationships have been postulated between Chiripa and the Wankarani complex of the Bolivian altiplano, the Alto Ramirez tradition of the northern Chilean coast, the Huaracane phase of the Moquegua Valley and others. While there is no lack of conjecture,

these relations remain very poorly understood. Recent advances in our understanding of some of these social formations, in particular of the Huaracane and Wankarani cultures, have made it clear that this is due, in large part, to the lack of systematically-collected and reliable data from Chiripa itself, or from the southern Titicaca Basin [**Southern Basin**]. Ours is one of a handful of projects that are working on this problem currently, and new data is coming to light at a rapid rate.

A number of projects have excavated at Chiripa since Bennett first broke earth there in 1933. The excavations of the Taraco Archaeological Project (TAP) in Chiripa in 1992 and 1996, directed by Christine Hastorf, have brought to light new evidence regarding the history and organization of public architecture at Chiripa, which should improve our understanding of both the Titicaca Basin Formative and of its relations with other contemporary societies of the South Central Andes. It is the results of these investigations that we will be presenting today in an abbreviated form.

Chiripa

[**Taraco Peninsula Map**] Chiripa is located on the northern shores of the Taraco Peninsula, in the Ingavi Province of the Department of La Paz, Bolivia, at an

altitude of 3840 m.a.s.l. **[Photo of mound]** The most conspicuous prehispanic feature on the site is an artificial earthen mound, originally measuring 60 X 60 m, and standing 6 m above the surrounding terrain. Most of the site today, however, consists of a dense surface scatter of cultural material in cultivated fields.

In the 63 years that have passed since Bennett undertook his excavations at the site, there has been considerable debate concerning the nature of the "Chiripa culture" and of the so-called **[Plan of Upper House Level]**"houses" of its famous type site. Bennett interpreted the circle of structures of the so-called "Upper House Level" as a village of 14 houses. As Karen Chavez has emphasized, this interpretation has dominated subsequent discussion. Kidder also asserted that the complex of "Upper Houses" represented a small village. This interpretation was even maintained by Browman, despite the fact that he confirmed the existence in the center of the complex of a semi-subterranean temple, the presence of which had been suspected by Bennett. All of these researchers had in common the belief that the extent of the Formative Period occupation was restricted to the mound itself, and perhaps a small adjoining area. **[whole site plan]**

It was Karen Chavez who first developed the argument that the Upper House complex represented not a domestic occupation, but rather a ceremonial-redistributive complex. She argued that the "Upper Houses" were not houses as such, but rather elite habitations and/or structures for the storage of ritual or status goods. She suggests that the domestic occupation areas of the site were located beyond the mound itself, "perhaps to the North, where Bennett encountered Chiripa refuse." Recent investigations carried out by Max Portugal Ortiz in the Chiripa site of Titi-mani, also in Bolivia on the eastern side of the lake, support the idea that the Chiripa mound is most appropriately interpreted as a ceremonial complex, and not as a small village.

The excavations of TAP have shed new light on the evolution of the site over time and permit us to better evaluate previous interpretations of its history. A systematic surface collection of 30 ha, including the entire site and its surroundings, reported elsewhere, has revealed that Chavez was indeed correct. The Formative Period occupation of Chiripa covers an area of approximately 7 ha, making it one of the largest known sites of the Titicaca Basin Middle Formative. Our investigations have also revealed a long sequence of public architecture, spanning more than a millennium, much longer and more varied than either Chavez or ourselves

had anticipated.

Architectural Sequence

Our excavations have focused on three separate sectors of the site: 1) the Santiago area, to the north of the mound, 2) the Llusco area, to the south of the mound, and 3) the mound itself. On the basis of these excavations we have defined a four-stage sequence of ceremonial construction within the Formative Period. This sequence clearly demonstrates that Chiripa was a ceremonial center since at least 3000 years ago.

Santiago

[Santiago excavation overview] The first phase is represented by a structure encountered in the Santiago area. This is a semi-subterranean structure, **[Santiago structure map or photo overview]** approximately 13 X 11 m, although one of the walls has yet to be touched by excavation. The walls are of alluvial cobbles. The original depth of the structure is impossible to determine, since the upper

parts of the walls have been removed by plowing. There are indications that the walls and floor of the structure were covered with a yellow or white clay plaster. **[Plaster on wall, 92]** At present, we have exposed portions of three of the walls, but only a small sample of the floor. For this reason, we are unable to infer the range of activities that took place within this structure. We have recently obtained a radiocarbon date of approximately 1400 BC from a hearth associated with its construction. While we have yet to run a radiocarbon sample from an abandonment context, ceramically the lowest levels of interior midden fill contain Middle Chiripa material, suggesting abandonment sometime between 800 and 1000 BC. The structure is associated, therefore, with the Early Chiripa phase, and the early portion of the Middle Chiripa phase. This would make it the earliest known example of a semisubterranean structure in the Titicaca Basin.

Llusco

[Site Map] [Llusco photo] The second phase of public architectural construction at the site is represented by the structure excavated in the Llusco area. The Llusco structure was partially exposed in 1992. In 1996, we completely defined

the walls of the structures, excavating either walls or wall trenches on all four sides. **[Llusco map]** The structure is 13 m long and 11.5 m long, very similar to the Santiago structure just described. Like the earlier structure, it is semisubterranean and the walls are composed of alluvial cobbles. The floor is composed of a compact white clay plaster. Below the Northwest corner we encountered a drainage canal, **[canal]** still preserved for a length of four meters. The Llusco structure was utilized between 800 and 550 BC - we have a number of dates from construction, use and abandonment contexts - and is associated with the earliest appearance of Late of "classic" Chiripa ceramics.

Mound

[mound photo] The third public architectural phase at the site is what Kidder called the "Lower House Level". Before the 1996 excavations of TAP, this phase was known only through the 1955 excavations of Kidder and Bolivian archaeological pioneer, Gregorio Cordero Miranda. They - or rather, William Coe, the actual excavator - uncovered the remains of two fieldstone structures below the location of Bennett's Upper Houses 2 and 3, on the northwest corner of the mound. The

details of this excavation have never been properly published. In our 1996 excavations, in a level stratigraphically below the Upper House Level, we located the remains of at least five structures. Samples of all five were excavated, revealing details of their construction and use. **[Mound Map]**

There appear to be two distinct types of Lower House Level structures. **[photo of Mont 1-B]** The first type is represented by structures 12 and, possibly, 16, encountered in the Montculo 1-B trench. The walls of one of these structures (ASD-12) are preserved to one meter in height. The walls are of unworked alluvial cobbles set in an organic mud mortar, and the structures have a northeast-southwest orientation. We excavated only the eastern corner of this structure, discovering that the fill was composed of wall fall, including numerous adobes with yellow plaster remnants. The structure floor is an unprepared, use-compacted surface. No artifacts were encountered on this surface, and the function of the structure remains uncertain. The construction of this structure appears to be quite similar to that of the structures excavated by Coe in 1955.

[Mont 1-A profile, detail] The second type of Lower House Level structure,

encountered in the Montculo 1-A trench, is represented by a sequence of three structures (13-15), completely distinct from those just described. These structures were encountered superimposed, one above the other, and each one has between two and four yellow clay plaster floors superimposed in their interior, for a total of eight floors in the sequence. The walls are composed of a mix of adobe, clay mortar, and unworked alluvial cobbles. **[Wall plaster floor join]** Adobe occurs as bricks and also as tapia - puddled adobe. In one of these structures, walls were covered with a thin wash of red clay, and the finds of small bits of red plaster on other floors suggests that this was the case with the other structures, as well. **[clean floor]** For the most part, the floors were cleaned before abandonment, and few artifacts were encountered on the surfaces.

The structures were built one on top of the other, the upper portion of the existing structure being destroyed in order to make way for the walls of the new one. The resulting rubble was used to create a platform for the construction of the new structure. Apparently, the abandonment of one floor and the construction of another was accompanied by a specific ritual practice. **[sand fill over floor]** First, a thin cap of fill - generally derived from midden or other cultural deposits, in one case sterile sand - was placed over the old floor. On top of this fill level, a fire was

kindled. **[burned area]** Evidence of fire is present on top of the fill levels covering at least six of the eight floors in the sequence. For the moment, we interpret these burning events as elements of a standardized ritual practice associated with the closing, or "killing", of an old floor, and the construction or opening of another. **[new clean floor]** Immediately following the termination of this "burning ritual", a new floor was constructed of clean yellow clay. The floor was placed immediately on top of the ash deposit resulting from the burning episode.

[burned spot] This cycle was repeated at least eight times in the sequence of structures we have exposed, and would seem to indicate a long-term ritual use of the mound area long before the construction of the Upper House Level structures.

The first Lower House Level structure (ASD-15) was constructed in approximately 550 BC, and the last (ASD-13) was abandoned in approximately 380 BC. (Again, Bill, help with dates here: based on old calibrations.) This is based on a series of seven radiocarbon dates taken from the Lower House Level sequence. It appears, then, that the Lower House Level structures were occupied for approximately 180 years. Given this fact, and the fact that there are eight floors in the

sequence, we can suggest that the proposed "burning ritual" - the replacement of a floor, and at times an entire structure, with another - took place at approximately 20-year intervals. The correspondence of this figure with the length of human generations would seem to be more than a mere coincidence, and we would propose, though we are unable to demonstrate this, that the reconstruction of these special-purpose structures was associated with generational succession.

[mound excavations in progress] At any rate, the Lower House Level is much more complicated than we had supposed before our excavations. The finding of numerous superimposed structures would seem to suggest that, unlike the Upper House Level complex, the Lower House Level was not constructed in a single, large-scale event, but rather accumulated gradually. In future investigations, we hope to clarify the spatial organization of the Lower House Level, and the nature of the lower mound levels in general.

[Map] [UH level map or photo] The fourth public architectural phase is Kidder's well-known Upper House Level. This level contains the remains of the famous "Chiripa Houses", with double walls, sliding door slots, etc., organized as an

enclosure facing a central sunken plaza. This plaza, although poorly understood, was certainly very similar, in both its dimensions and in its construction, to the Santiago and Llusco structures, described earlier. It therefore seems reasonable to suppose that the Lower House Level complex included a similar sunken court, though it is at present impossible to demonstrate this.

After the final abandonment of the uppermost structures of the Lower House Level, a thick layer of intentional fill was placed over their remains, creating a level earthen platform. This is the first example of true platform mound architecture at the site. On top of this platform, the Upper House Level structures were built. This almost certainly took place relatively soon after the abandonment of the Lower House Level structures, or sometime around 380 BC. **[House 5]** As part of our 1996 investigations, we cleaned House 5, previously excavated by Kidder and Cordero Miranda. From small flotation samples removed from intact deposits over the floor and interior bins, we obtained three radiocarbon dates, all falling within a few decades of 270 BC. Therefore, our present understanding of the chronological placement of the Upper House Level departs considerably from what has been suggested by previous researchers. We place the Upper house Levels structures between 380 and 270 BC, a relatively short occupation, ending much earlier than

has previously been supposed. The supposed overlap between the Late Chiripa phase and the Pukara and Tiwanaku I phases will therefore require re-evaluation. It may be that Chiripa will have to be viewed not as a competitor of Pukara, but rather as an antecedent.

[House 5 entrance] At any rate, it is clear that the oft-mentioned destruction of the Upper House Level by fire, which Graffam and others have interpreted as evidence of an armed conflict between Chiripa and Tiwanaku, can in fact be more parsimoniously explained as a larger-scale enactment of the same "burning ritual" observed repeatedly in the Lower House Level sequence. That is, the burning of the Upper House Level structures may be taken to mark the ritual closure of the complex prior to the construction of the subsequent public architectural monument at the site, the Formative Tiwanaku temple. **[Tiwanaku temple]**

Conclusions

It is clear, therefore, that the history of public architecture in the southern Titicaca Basin is considerably longer and more varied than had been anticipated. Begin-

ning around 1000 B.C., and continuing through the Tiwanaku period, the people of Chiripa [**Choncaya figurine**] repeatedly built, remodeled and continuously maintained a series of public architectural complexes. The form of these structures, and the persistence of this form through the centuries, clearly anticipates later Pukara and Tiwanaku architectural practices.

Moreover, it is apparent, in light of this long and reasonably well-dated architectural sequence, that the celebrated "Upper Houses" of the Chiripa mound are a very late, short-lived, and, we propose, atypical manifestation of an ancient tradition. They were built at the very end of the Late Chiripa phase and were occupied for no more than a century. This may well explain the fact that no similar structures have been located at other contemporary Chiripa sites.

Our understanding of regional-scale dynamics in the Titicaca Basin Formative, while being the subject of continuing investigation, remains tentative. It is becoming clear, however, that the end of the Middle Formative, the late Late Chiripa phase, in the Chiripa chronology, was a time of considerable social dynamism and innovation. With several ongoing research projects active in the region, we antic-

ipate that the nature and significance of this period will be considerably clarified
in the near future.¹

¹Note: All C-14 dates reported in this paper have been corrected.