

# Multi-Community Polity Formation in the Titicaca Basin Formative: Season 1

Matthew Bandy and Christine Hastorf

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a newly-initiated project investigating the early development of social complexity in the southern Titicaca Basin. The project is designed to complement and extend our previous research at the site of Chiripa. The background to the project is presented, as well as the results of the first season of excavations at the site of Coa Kkollu. These include the exposure of two Middle Formative sunken temples, as well as a Late Formative ceremonial structure.

**[X map of Basin]** The Titicaca Basin is one of several apparently independent loci of primary state formation in the Andean region. As is usual in such cases, archaeologists have taken as their principal research object this state system in its mature form; the Tiwanaku state. **[X tiw photo]** Beginning in the late 19th century, a series of projects have elucidated the form and arrangement of the Tiwanaku ceremonial core **[X photo]**, the mechanisms of Tiwanaku surplus extraction **[X raised fields]**, and the organization of both its local hinterland and its distant colonial enclaves **[X moq]**. These projects have included those of Kidder, Bennett, Ponce, Kolata, Mathews, Albarracín-Jordan, Goldstein, and, most recently, Couture, Blom, Janusek, and Vranich.

**[X blank]** It has only been in the past fifteen years or so that a significant effort has been made to understand the long Formative period that preceded Tiwanaku state formation. **[X kidder excavation]** The broad outlines of Formative Period cultural chronology were sketched by the pioneering investigations of Bennett, Kidder, Browman, and Mujica and Wheeler. The more recent work of Aldenderfer, Stanish, Hastorf, Bermann, and a large community of graduate students and younger scholars has begun to flesh out the bare skeleton of Formative Period social evolution and cultural process. This improved understanding of the Formative period will inevitably revolutionize our models of the Tiwanaku state. More importantly, however, it is beginning to provide us with a picture of long-term social evolution in the Titicaca Basin.

**[X group photo]** The Taraco Archaeological Project is one of this latest generation of archaeological projects focused on the Titicaca Basin Formative. **[X Chiripa]** The first phase of the project, between 1992 and 2000, involved a series of excavations at the southern Basin Formative type site of Chiripa. **[X settlement]** This phase of the project culminated in Bandy's 1998-1999 settlement survey of the Taraco Peninsula. Altogether, this first phase of the project has produced a usable ceramic chronology for the southern Titicaca Basin, and has identified a number of critical social evolutionary processes.

## Chronology

**[X chronology]** At present, we divide the southern Titicaca Basin Formative Period into 3 major historical periods, all preceding Tiwanaku state formation.

The Early Formative (1500-800 B.C.) on the Taraco Peninsula was characterized by the establishment of sedentary villages, with at least a partially agricultural economy. Villages at this time apparently lacked public architecture and fissioned when they grew to approximately 200 inhabitants. Ceramically, it includes the Early and Middle Chiripa phases.

The Middle Formative (800-250 B.C.) saw the formation of a system of large, permanent villages, of which Chiripa was an example. In this phase village fissioning ceased, and public architecture was constructed on a modest scale. **[X YM sculpture]** Also at this time, a regional religious tradition known as the Yaya-Mama Religious Tradition emerged, characterized by distinctive stone sculpture, **[X sunken]** sunken court architecture, **[X LC]** decorated serving ceramics, **[X trump]** ceramic trumpets, and pedestal-based burning bowls. The famous Upper House Level structures of Chiripa, excavated by Bennett, Kidder, and others belong to this tradition, and were built late in the Middle Formative. At the same time that the Yaya Mama Religious Tradition emerged, village fissioning ceased. **[X hoe]** We also have evidence for widespread exchange of lithic agricultural implements within the Titicaca Basin at this time.

**[X chronology again]** The Late Formative (250 B.C. - A.D. 550) saw the formation of the first multi-community polities in the region, and probably the first multi-community polities in the entire Titicaca Basin. In the first part of the Late Formative, up to 300 A.D., the most significant site in the Basin was Pukara. **[X Pukara photo]** After 200 B.C., Pukara grew to something approaching urban proportions. The southern Basin was, relatively speaking, a backwater. **[X map]** However, at roughly the time that Pukara became a center, around 200 B.C., a series of multi-community polities emerged in the southern basin. The best known of these are the Tiwanaku polity, centered at Tiwanaku, and the Taraco Peninsula Polity, centered at Kala Uyuni. Other analogous and contemporary polities likely included the Southern Ccapia Polity on the Peruvian side of the lake, and the Kallamarka polity in the upper Tiwanaku Valley.

The episode of initial polity formation in the early part of the Late Formative (Tiwanaku I) was therefore a critical evolutionary moment in Titicaca Basin prehistory. It was at this time that we first witness what Carneiro refers to as “the superseding of village autonomy,” a process that was clearly a necessary precondition for later Tiwanaku state formation. In the second phase of the Taraco Archaeological Project we aim to study this episode of multi-community polity formation in detail. This phase of the project began this last field season. In this paper we report the preliminary results of this first season of work at the site of Kala Uyuni.

## **Kala Uyuni**

**[X map]** In the MF (Late Chiripa), Kala Uyuni had been one of a number of roughly equivalent politically autonomous villages occupying the Bolivia’s Taraco Peninsula. Near the beginning of the Late Formative, however, Kala Uyuni began to grow very rapidly, and was soon - at approximately 15 ha - more than twice as large as any contemporary Taraco Peninsula site. At the same time, the other old villages of the Peninsula actually decreased in size, suggesting that population was actually moving from the old villages into the expanding center of Kala Uyuni. This process produced a three-tiered site size hierarchy for the first time in the settlement history of the region. We interpret these data as indicating Kala Uyuni’s rise to political supremacy, and the formation of a multi-community polity: the Taraco Peninsula Polity.

**[X site map]** Kala Uyuni is located near a small mountain. The site consists of two separate ceramic scatters; one at the base of the hill, called Kala Uyuni, and another near the top of the hill known as Achachi Coa Kkollu. **[X photo]** The lower area is comprised primarily of Late Formative ceramics, with a smaller Middle Formative (LC) occupation area included within it. Some traces of Early Formative occupation are also present. The upper area, Achachi Coa Kkollu, covers only approximately 1.5 ha, but appears to contain materials related primarily to ceremonial activities. In most Formative sites in this area, public architecture is located in the midst of habitation debris. **[X site map]** In the case of Kala Uyuni, however, the site would appear to have a spatially segregated ceremonial sector. This should allow us to define more clearly the difference between

ceremonial and domestic artifact assemblages and to define somewhat more precisely the nature of the activities carried out in Formative Period public architecture.

Since we wished to obtain samples of both ceremonial and domestic assemblages for both the Late Chiripa and Tiwanaku I phases, we excavated in three areas: two within the habitation zone, and within the ceremonial hilltop sector.

## **Ayrampu Qontu**

[X map] [X photo] In the Ayrampu Qontu area, we excavated a relatively deep sequence of stratified Early and Middle Formative midden. Most of the deposition took place during the Middle Formative (LC). That is, this midden pertains to the earlier period of occupation at Kala Uyuni, before it became a political center. The materials seem to be entirely domestic in nature. No architecture was recovered, not features of any kind.

## **Kala Uyuni**

[X map] [X photo] In the Kala Uyuni area, we excavated two main trenches. [X] One of these was a deep trench containing stratified deposits. All of these deposits pertained to the Late Formative, with the exception of some Classic Tiwanaku material, [X] including tombs, near the top. The Late Formative materials from this trench included Kalasasaya red-rimmed bowls [X] and a relatively high frequency of zone-incised sherds [X]. This may indicate a non-domestic, serving-oriented ceramic assemblage.

Excavations in the second trench in this area would seem to confirm the impression we get from the artifacts. [X] Here, at a depth of about 1.5 meters, we encountered the remains of a stone foundation. The foundation was roughly rectangular in form, and was covered with a thick layer of pure yellow clay. It appears that the walls of the structure were originally composed of yellow clay placed on a stone foundation. There was not prepared interior floor. Several informal firepits were placed nearby in an associated exterior surface. The ceramics associated with this structure are pure Tiwanaku I (Kalasasaya) in date, and, as with the other trench in this area, suggest a public

or ceremonial function for the area and for the structure. [X] The structure may form part of a larger complex. We may have fortuitously located the Late Formative public architectural core of the site. This is a hypothesis we intend to test in future seasons.

## **Achachi Coa Kkollu**

[X map] The third area we excavated was the hilltop ceremonial sector; Achachi Coa Kkollu. [X photo] Very little other than ceramics was visible on the surface of this area. The only surface indications of architecture were a few highly eroded limestone blocks in the southern part of the sector. However, these blocks, [X] in addition to the presence of high frequencies of decorated and imported pottery, suggested a non-domestic function for the sector. Intensive excavations this last season more than confirmed this initial impression.

[X map] After excavating 15 trenches of varying dimensions in this sector, we can say with confidence that we have located and roughly delineated two sunken court structures. Both structures are trapezoidal, and are wider to the south than to the north. Both also display evidence of at least one remodeling event each. Ceramically, the construction, use, and abandonment of both courts took place in the Middle Formative (LC). Though we do not yet have radiocarbon dates, we suggest that they were contemporary with the mound structures at Chiripa. Each of these courts contained very interesting finds. I will discuss them in turn.

## **Upper Court**

The northern court is uphill of the southern one, and for this reason we refer to it as the upper court. [X] The most prominent feature of the upper court was a rectangular sandstone monolith still standing in the center of the floor. Unfortunately, it was undecorated. However, the notch in the top associates it stylistically with other stelae of the Titicaca Basin Formative. The base of the monolith was wedged with limestone and quartzite boulders, and we can clearly date its erection to the construction of the latest floor within the court. [X] Nearby, in a deposit related to the floor reconstruction, we located an in-situ example of portable stone sculpture. [X] This is an

example of what Sergio Chavez has called a “lightning stone,” and several very similar examples are known from the southern Titicaca Basin. However, this would appear to be the first of these objects to be found in-situ. The context from which it was recovered dates it very clearly to the Middle Formative; the Late Chiripa phase.

### **Lower Court**

[X map] [X wall] The walls of the lower court are in general better-preserved than were those of the upper court. The walls pertaining to the latest construction stage are all constructed in generally the same manner, consisting of large pillars of white limestone interspersed with smaller rocks, often local quartzite cobbles. This construction method very clearly anticipates Late Formative (Tiwanaku I) constructions such as [X] the semi-subterranean temple at Tiwanaku, and [X] the sunken court at Chisi. To our knowledge, and please correct us if we are mistaken, this is the only instance of this kind of architecture, and may indicate an important role for Kala Uyuni in the development of Titicaca Basin ritual architecture.

[X] The limestone blocks, incidentally, are not local but are mined from bedrock outcrops located about two kilometers from the site. [X]

[X] At the time the lower court was constructed - beneath its earliest floor - we discovered a dedicatory human burial. As you can see, the space was very cramped for mortuary excavation, but we were able to expose and recover all of the skeleton except for the legs and feet which were beneath the eastern wall of the court. [X] This composite photograph shows the relative position of the cranium and post-cranial skeleton, which were of necessity excavated separately. As you can see, the body is resting on its back, with its right arm raised and its left arm lowered. It would not be an exaggeration to characterize its position as “splayed.” The cranium is quite obviously modified. [X] More interesting, however, is fact that the cranium was resting not upon the cervical vertebrae, as it ought, but rather upon the chest of the skeleton.

This burial, then, is in an unusual anatomical position, on the back with legs flexed and arms splayed. The cranium is resting on the chest, and is oriented in a fashion that suggests it was not

attached to the neck at the time of its deposition. The body is not located in a pit, and has no grave furniture, but was placed on the floor of the cut that created the sunken court and covered directly with its earliest floor. Together, these facts strongly suggest that the body is that of a sacrificial victim, perhaps a captive, decapitated and thrown into the court as a dedicatory offering.

## **Conclusions**

[X] To conclude, we are very pleased with the results of this first season. We look forward to presenting the results of upcoming seasons and of our ongoing analytical efforts on another occasion. Thank you.