

# Excavations on the Chiripa Mound

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[Slide: Mound location]

[photo of mound]

The mound at Chiripa, originally measuring 60 X 60 m, and standing 6 m above the surrounding terrain, is the site's most conspicuous and well-known prehispanic feature. It was first noted as an object of antiquarian or archaeological interest, according to Ponce Sangines, by Padre Pedro Marabini in 1920. Marabini noted the presence of large upright stones, similar to those of the Kalasasaya at Tiwanaku, and recommended that the site be investigated scientifically. In the almost eighty years since Marabini made these observations, the Chiripa mound has been the subject of no less than five archaeological projects.

[slide or overhead showing previous work]

Wendell Bennett excavated there in 1934, uncovering the remains of two structures and opening a large trench in the Northwest corner. He was the first to excavate an example of the now-famous "Upper Houses", and to postulate the existence of a circle of such structures surrounding a central court, what Kidder was later to term the "Upper House Level".

Later, in 1937 or 1940 - the date remains uncertain - Maks Portugal Zamora and Maria Luisa Sanchez Bustamente de Urioste were sent to the site by the Bolivian Min-

istry of Education. They excavated a structure and a trench on the Northeast corner of the mound. This was the structure that Kidder was later to term House C. In 1955, Alfred Kidder III, together with pioneering Bolivian archaeologist Gregorio Cordero Miranda, undertook quite large scale excavations on the mound. This project excavated almost all of one of the “Upper Houses”, and portions of several others, as well as a deep pit in the Northwest corner of the mound. They also cleaned, drew and excavated a portion of the mound’s eastern face. Concrete contributions of this project included verification of the Upper House enclosure, a ceramic chronology - elaborated by Karen Mohr - and the identification of a stratigraphic level on the mound below the “Upper House Level”, the so-called “Lower House Level”. Additionally, Kidder was the first to apply the then-novel methodology of radiocarbon dating to the site, producing a relatively adequate absolute chronology.

In 1974 and 1975 David Browman -discussant - and the same Cordero Miranda returned to the mound. Their work concentrated on clearing the central sunken court, dating to a post-Chiripa period, and on excavating a series of stratigraphic soundings. This work resulted in a further refinement of the site’s chronology.

[Slide: DEM of mound]

Given the amount of work that has been done on the mound, it is only appropriate to ask why TAP has seen fit to excavate there once again. I will defend this action by saying that after the work of the 1992 season, in which we worked entirely away from the mound, we were faced with the problem of correlating our ceramic chronology and architectural sequence with the better-known remains from the mound. Faced with these problems, we realized that we did not, in fact, understand the mound nearly as well as we had thought. A series of problems, mostly of a chronological nature, continued to bedevil us. To resolve these problems, we determined to undertake a careful and altogether very modest program of excavations on the mound in order to answer two very specific questions.

[Llusco slide]

The first question was this: in 1992 we had defined a semi-subterranean structure in the Llusco excavation area. This structure was constructed in approximately 800 BC and abandoned in approximately 600 BC. Both Kidder and Browman had dated the Lower House Level complex to this interval. The question thus arose as to whether the Llusco structure was contemporaneous with the Lower House Level structures, and if so what roles did each complex play in the life of the settlement?

[Slide of cleaned profile, whole thing]

To answer this question it was necessary to locate, excavate and date Lower House Level remains. We decided to attempt to locate these remains along the Eastern face

of the mound, where Sawyer, a member of the Kidder project, had discovered an intact profile revealing the depositional history of the mound. We cleaned and drew a 17 meter section of the Southern half of the East face of the mound. In this profile we located a series of plaster floors and stone and adobe walls, in a position stratigraphically antecedent to the Upper House Level (represented in this profile by House G). [Slide: House G wall in profile] Limited test excavations were undertaken in the form of two small trenches cutting back in from the profile. The results of these excavations follow.

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 Mont'culo 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 Mont'culo 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. 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 any event, we have successfully answered the question we began with. It is certain that the Llusco structure preceded the Lower House Level structures as the ceremonial nucleus of the settlement. Thus we have constructed a five-stage sequence of public architecture at the site. In no case have we demonstrated the contemporary existence of multiple public architectural complexes. In this, Chiripa differs from later centers, such as Pukara and Tiwanaku.

[Mound Map or UH photo]

The second question we posed when we began the mound excavations was this: what was the duration and timing of the occupation and abandonment of the famous Upper Houses? Despite the considerable work that had been done in the Upper Houses previously, and the prior radiocarbon work of Kidder and Browman, estimates of the occupation period of the structures were still unacceptably variable. If the Upper House

complex represents the height of Chiripa's development and regional influence, as is often assumed to be the case, then a precise determination of construction and abandonment dates for the complex is essential. Only with this data will we be able to interpret the remarkable construction of the Upper House complex in relation to events elsewhere in the Tiwanaku core region and in the Titicaca Basin more broadly.

[House 5 photo]

In order to answer this question, we cleaned House 5, previously excavated by Kidder and Cordero Miranda. We removed Kidder's backdirt to slightly below the preserved level of the walls. [Slide] In three locations, we excavated to the level of the interior floors. Two of these locations were within the in-wall bins of the structure and one was in the structure's interior. We then obtained 20-liter samples of the intact deposits overlying the floor in each of these areas. One AMS radiocarbon determination was obtained from each of these three samples; all fall 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.

[Slide: step-fret element, discuss]

This chronological correction also radically changes our ideas of the Copacabana Chiripa-related ceramic phases. Thus, the Yaya-Mama phases B and C defined by Karen and Sergio Chavez, if the dates reported by those investigators are correct, post-date the destruction of the Upper House complex at Chiripa. They may properly be considered not as a Late Chiripa variant, but rather as what Uhle might have called a 'Chiripa epigonal'; a terminal manifestation of the style, post-dating its disappearance at Chiripa itself. Carlos Lemuz has suggested to me that a similar Terminal Chiripa phase may be present on the Achacachi Peninsula.

[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]

Moreover, it is apparent, in light of this long and reasonably well-dated architec-

tural 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.

As a final reflection, we may note that Chiripa - and the Middle Formative in the core region of Tiwanaku - is distinguished in Titicaca Basin prehistory by the precocity both of its development and of its failure. The core region of Tiwanaku saw the development of large corporate settlement and public architecture apparently well before the remainder of the Basin, in the Late Chiripa phase. On the other hand, this precocious regional system seems to have collapsed at the end of the Middle Formative, while other, neighboring systems, such as Stanish’s Sillumocco polity near Juli, continued to expand and evolve. This dual precocity suggests an interesting and unique social dynamic in the Formative Period societies of the core region of Tiwanaku; a dynamic that was almost certainly implicated in Tiwanaku state formation, and a dynamic which we still understand very poorly. The continuing work of TAP in the coming seasons will be directed, in part, to the resolution of this problem.

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