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Sicán Elite Tombs and Their Broader Implications

The Central Andean country of Peru has a rich and prominent prehispanic cultural heritage and has adopted unique ancient icons as symbols of its modern nation and institutions. Two of the most striking and commonly seen icons are the gold *tumi* ceremonial knife and the funerary mask which often appears on book covers (Fig. 1). The tremendous public outrage is understandable when the famous *Tumi de Illimo* was stolen from the National Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology in Lima and found sometime later cut up and partially melted down. Yet, in contrast, little concern has ever been expressed in regard to the lack of information about the cultural significance of the *tumi* knife or masks.

As correctly inferred around the turn of the century by Max Uhle, the father of scientific archaeology in the Central Andes, the distinct art style exemplified by these masks and *tumi* knives was known to have flourished in the Lambayeque region of the North Coast of Peru long

before the emergence of the mighty Inca Empire in the fourteenth century AD. The region, endowed with large perennial rivers and extensive, fertile plains, has by far the most productive agricultural land of the entire Peruvian coast. At the time of the apogee of prehispanic cultural development some 1,000 years ago, historian Paul Kosok estimates that the region represented about one-third of the total cultivated area and population of the Peruvian coast. In other words, the Lambayeque region is one of the two major bread baskets of the Central Andes, along with the southern high plateau region around Lake Titicaca, the home of Tiwanaku and Inca cultures. The Lambayeque region also boasts most of the largest irrigation systems and monumental architecture of South America.

Curiously, however, the region received little in-depth archaeological attention until the mid-1970's. The pioneering works of American scholars such as A. L. Kroeber, Paul Kosok and Richard Schaedel were limited to surface surveys and mapping without any excavations. Ironically, while these works were being carried out, systematic grave plundering was taking place, most notably in the Batán Grande *hacienda* (large estate) in the middle of the small La Leche valley, about one hour's ride from the city of Chiclayo (c. 800km north of Lima).

Modern looting fervour in Batán Grande began in the mid-1930's with the discovery of quantities of gold funerary offerings from deep tombs at the site of Sicán

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From the Director's Desk

New members have joined the Trustees as well as the Scientific Committee. p. 15.

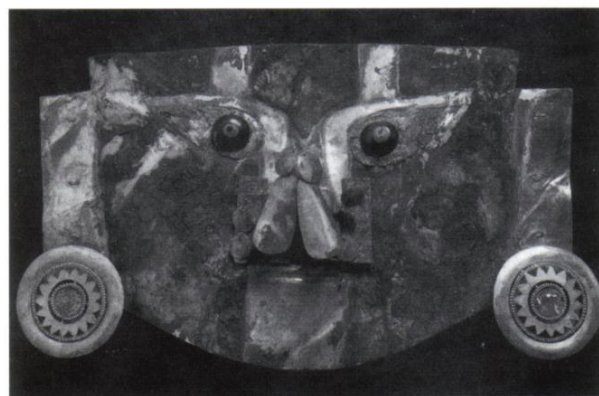


Fig. 1. Cinnabar covered gold mask from the principal burial of the Huaca Loro tomb. Note the pair of ear spoons, nose ornament, and algarrobo resin and emerald beads.

within what is now the Poma National Archaeological Reserve. *Hacienda* peasants in groups of 10–15 were taken away from their work in agricultural fields and assigned to looting activities under the direction of *maestros* or masters who excelled in locating tombs. The grave looting technique of systematically placed vertical prospecting pits with radiating horizontal tunnels developed and subsequently spread over a wide geographic area. The extent and intensity of looting continued to increase, culminating in the late 1960's when a bulldozer was employed for a year to remove surface soil and facilitate identification of tomb pit outlines. Intense looting lasted until 1969 when the Agrarian Reform forced the *hacienda* owners out of Batán Grande. Sporadic looting continued until the mid-1970's; when the author began his fieldwork in 1978, some 100,000 holes and numerous long bulldozer trenches within the Poma National Archaeological Reserve were evident.

Here the first scientifically excavated Middle Sicán shaft tombs are described and the nature of their socio-political organization and elite considered. Over the past fourteen years, the Sicán Archaeological Project centred in the Batán Grande region has clarified varied material and organizational features of the pre-Incaic Sicán culture, such as its bronze and ceramic production and monumental pyramid constructions. One topic that has awaited in-depth investigation has been the nature of Sicán socio-political organization and elite, particularly the basis and nature of their evident power and wealth.

One of the approaches to this task involves multi-dimensional analysis of mortuary practices and grave goods. During the past 14 years, the Project encountered and excavated some twenty relatively small, simple Sicán burials in diverse settings in and outside of the inferred Middle Sicán capital of Sicán. The resultant sample hardly reflected the degree and nature of social differentiation inferred from the artistic depictions and published and unpublished information on looted tombs. J. C. Tello, L. Valcárcel and, more recently, A. Pedersen have reported impressive quantities and diversity of gold and other costly objects looted from Sicán shaft tombs in Batán Grande as large as 15 x 15m at the top and 15m deep. An estimated 85% of the authentic Sicán-style gold objects in the Gold of Peru Museum in Lima is thought to have been derived from Sicán shaft tombs in Poma. However, given their looted origin, little can be said with any certainty of their socio-political, religious and economic correlates and significance.

The focus of the 1991–2 fieldwork (which ended in March) was the excavation of two inferred Middle Sicán elite tombs: a large 15 x 15m tomb in a stabilized sand dune some 120m due south of the Huaca Las Ventanas pyramid and a 3 x 3m tomb at the north base of the Huaca Loro pyramid, some 350m to the west (Fig. 2). These tombs, with their relatively large size and proximity to the main pyramids within the inferred capital, are seen as indicative of the social importance of the deceased interred there and augment the extant burial sample. Funerary treatment and contents were expected to verify this supposition and to provide important clues to the nature of the Sicán elite and their power and wealth. At the same time, this highly contrasting pair of tombs was selected to test the model of differential sacred value of tomb location, i.e. that symbolic value inversely relates to the distance from the pyramid and thus the higher the status of the deceased, the closer to the

pyramid that individual would be buried.

The 1991–2 fieldwork involved the participation of professionals and students from five countries and the expected complexity and size of the tombs to be excavated required much careful planning and preparation. For example, the excavation of large, deep and complex tombs requires a sizeable, well-trained crew, as well as ample time and good funding (Fig. 3). Most of the workers had from five to twelve years experience in archaeological excavation. Through ten years of prior research into varied aspects of the Sicán culture, we were also well versed with its chronology, technology and other relevant facts and issues. The nine-month long season was supported by a generous grant from the Shibusawa Ethnological Foundation and the Tokyo Broadcasting System of Tokyo, Japan. In addition, working in the area with such a long and infamous looting history as Batán Grande meant that the local population had to be educated as to the aims and value of scientific excavation by means of public lectures and field trips. Specialists in metals, geology, artefact conservation, organic remains, and human osteology willing to work in the field had to be brought together. Our prior research experience with Sicán bronze production was quite valuable in these respects. We established a long-term collaborative agreement with the Museo de la Nación (National Museum) in Lima with these objectives and our Peruvian co-director, Carlos Elera and conservator, Victor Chang are from the Museum. Also, for the past nine years, John F. Merkel of the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, has collaborated in the analysis and conservation of metal objects. Students from the archaeology programme at the Catholic University and the San Marcos National University, both in Lima, also assisted. Last, and by no means least, with some tombs said to reach as deep as 15 to 20 metres below the surface, we had to wait for a prolonged drought that would lower the ground water level. The area has suffered a drought since the major flood of 1983 and the water table was c. 16m below the surface during the excavation.

The Huaca Las Ventanas tomb excavation took nearly six months, largely due to its size and the technical problems stemming from the unstable sand matrix of the tomb. Much of the eastern half of the tomb had been looted sometime in the past. However, the intact portion revealed much about the tomb construction and internal organization. Essentially, the tomb had an inverted step-pyramid shape, the top measuring 15 x 15m. About 4m below the tomb opening, terraces with adobe brick buttressing walls on the north and south sides were identified. The south terrace preserved an offering consisting of a set of intentionally broken ceramic vessels, a sheet metal covered, double-spout ceramic bottle, and a 2.5 x 1.5m metal sheet with an elongated painting at the centre. The last displays what appears to be a cosmos vision of the Sicán religion with a red (cinnabar) sun and pale crescent moon on the east and west ends, respectively, and the Sicán Deity with a *tumi*-knife and trophy head at the centre flanked on both sides by a series of stylized ocean waves, fish and feathered 'serpents'. The painting was done on a thin plaster layer applied over a cotton cloth pasted on standardized copper alloy sheet metal panels (each 25 x 12.5cm) laid out side by side.

This previously undocumented use of sheet metal proved to be a major feature of the tomb; in essence, over 20 distinct layers of paper thin sheet metal, mostly

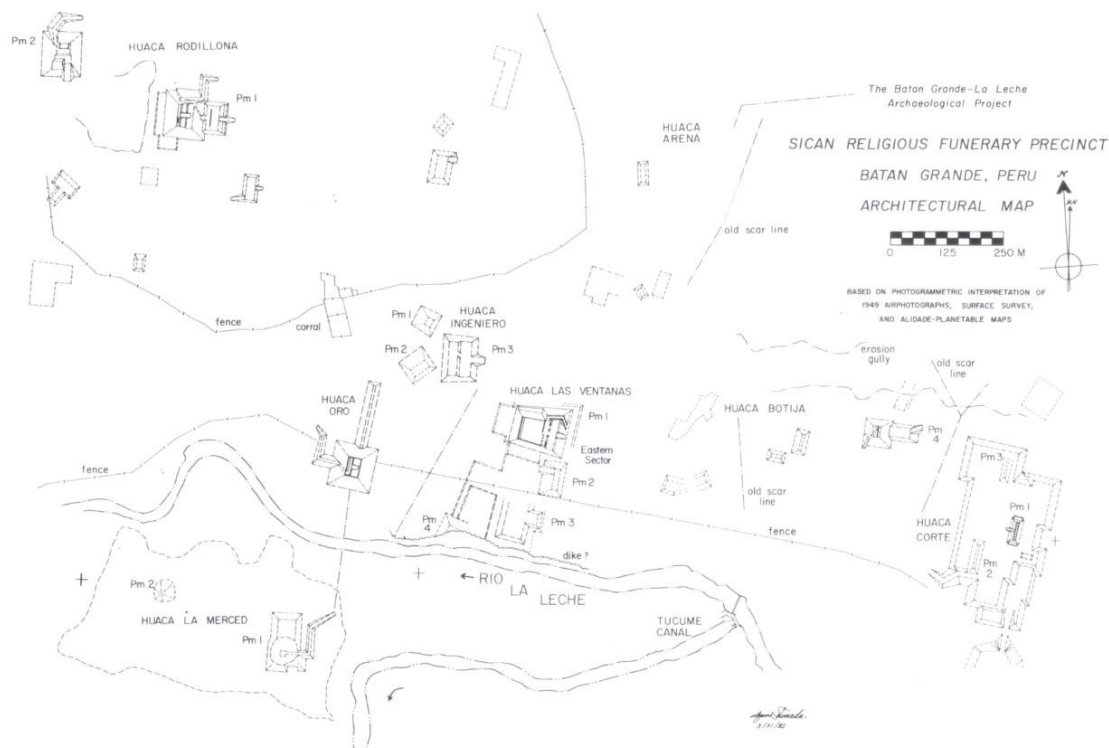


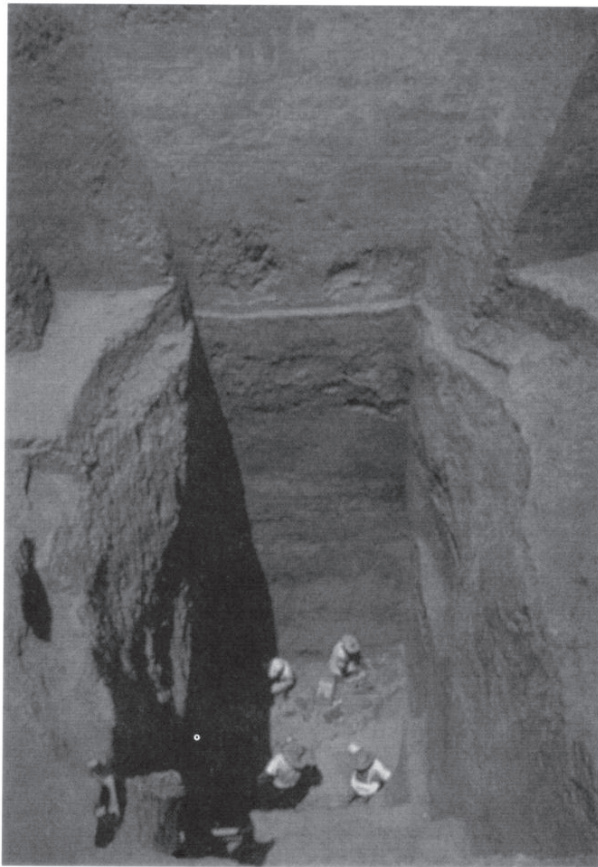
Fig. 2. Map of the Middle Sicán capital of Sicán with a dozen major adobe brick mounds and indications of the location of the two elite tombs excavated in 1991–92.

depletion-gilded and painted, lined the interior of the tomb and served to separate groups of offerings, as well as burials. This feature was quite evident on the west side of the tomb, where offerings began from a terrace at c. 8m depth. Through a series of descending 'terraces', offerings that included painted sheet metal panels, at least five sheet metal-covered double-spout ceramic bottles, shell beads, numerous packages of *naipes*, cast bronze implements, llama heads and limbs, continued to the centre and bottom of the tomb, c. 12m below the top of the pit. *Naipes* are sheet metal objects in standardized sizes and shapes that may have served as primitive currencies. At the bottom, the offerings covered an area of only 3 x 3m. Whole and partial remains of at least nine individuals, mostly young adult females, were found on the north and south edges of the lowest level offerings. Other than some traces of cloth that once wrapped the bodies, there were few or no offerings directly associated with them. We did not find a centrally placed individual that could be regarded as the principal burial.

The six-month Huaca Loro tomb excavation that ended in mid-March, 1992 was, technically speaking, straight forward and revealed a totally different content and internal organization. This is a good example of a Sicán shaft tomb in having an essentially square (2.5–3.0m to a side) cross-section and vertical shaft over 10m in depth. Fortunately, this tomb was dug in an area of consolidated clay, silt and sand flood deposits lessening the risk of cave-ins that occurred at Las Ventanas. The tomb fill was a heterogenous, stable mass of fine sand and clay lumps.

The internal organization and content of the burial chamber at the bottom of the shaft may be described in terms of six levels of artefacts and human burials spanning about 11 to 12.7m below the surface. The first and

Fig. 3. Panoramic view of the Huaca Loro tomb excavation, looking west. Note the vertical shaft of the tomb. Gold Cache 1 is just emerging in the back right corner.



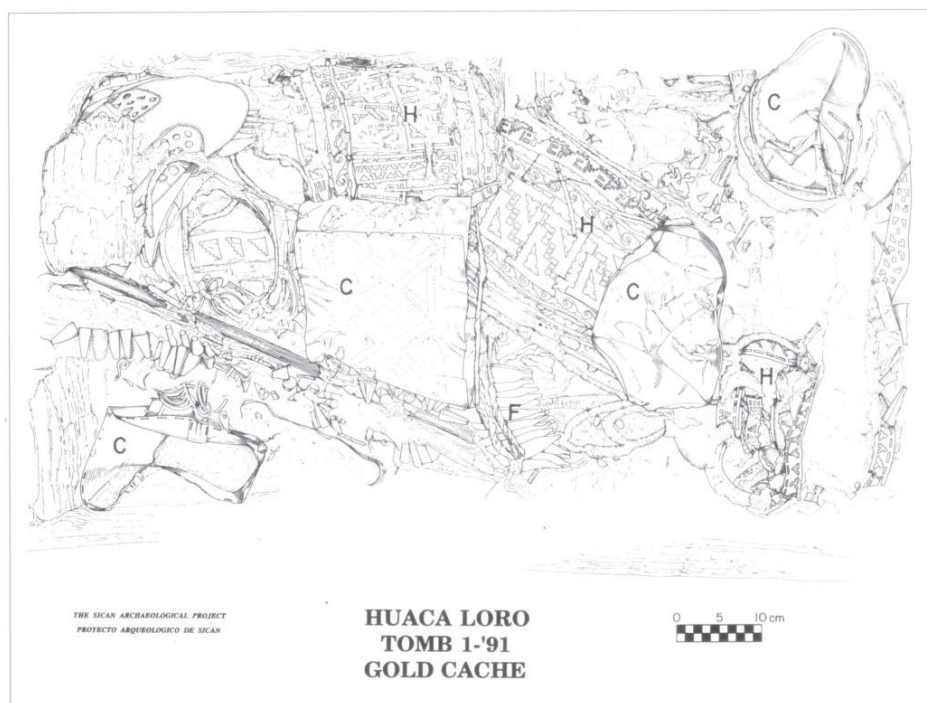


Fig. 4. Four crowns (C), intricately cut-out head ornaments (H), sets of gold 'feathers' (F), and other items are visible on the top layer of Gold Cache 1. Drawing by César Samillán.

top level consisted of a juvenile burial (10–12 years old, of indeterminate sex) in a seated position on top of a truncated pyramid-shape 'box' placed at the centre of the chamber. The box resembles a miniature version of the nearby Huaca Loro truncated pyramid. The face of the juvenile was painted with bright red cinnabar and had a shell bead necklace.

The second level corresponded to the aforementioned 'box' built of wood and cane frames and lined with gilded sheet metal and woven mats. It measured roughly 1.5m to a side at the base and stood c. 0.8m high.

Along the walls of the chamber surrounding the base of the central box (and representing the third level) were 15 bundles of cast bronze implements. Each bundle contained an average 30 pieces, each weighing 0.4 to 0.9kg. These implements had blunt ends, apparently had no use-wear, and probably did not serve as weapons. Some of these bundles were associated with what are popularly known as *virutas metálicas* – large piles of depletion-gilded sheet metal fragments. It appears that scraps or even imperfect products of sheet metal were simply piled up with these implements.

Clearly the most notable feature of the third level was a rectangular 1.2 x 0.6 metre 'box' nearly 30cm high lined with organic mats and sheet metal and placed at the north-west corner of the chamber (Figs 4, 6). It contained, at the centre, some two dozen packed layers of gold, *tumbaga* (gold-copper alloys) and silver objects, including five cylindrical crowns, four rattles, over a dozen *tumi*-shaped head ornaments, at least eight sets of 'feathers', and four head-bands. The majority of the objects appear to have been personal ornaments and ritual paraphernalia. When these flattened and corroded together objects are properly stabilized and detached, it is likely the total number of artefacts from this cache will exceed sixty or seventy. Most gold objects are over 18 carat. Like most known Middle Sicán objects, these newly found pieces are fashioned out of sheet metal and decorated by means of repoussé technique and cut-out

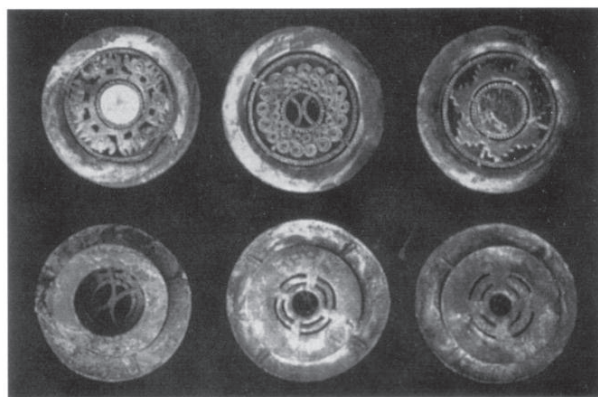
designs. Joining is most commonly done by means of staples.

The central box proved to be empty and had beneath it five intersecting, wooden poles that were originally covered by depletion-gilded sheet metal. Most of the poles had carved 'mythical feline' heads at the ends. It is thought that these poles once formed the frame of a litter, as depicted on Sicán ceramics and gold ear spools. In the south-east corner of the chamber, placed along the side of one pole, was a cluster of six pairs of large golden ear spools, some with elegant filigree ornamentation (Fig. 5).

The fourth level immediately below the poles revealed large piles of whole *Spondylus princeps* and *Conus fergusonii* shells weighing nearly a kilogram each, as well as a large cluster of shell, turquoise and other beads (c. 20kg in weight), and a wide range of ceramic vessels, including plates, jars, double-spout and single-spout bottles.

Occupying the centre of the fourth and fifth levels was the principal burial of the tomb, a seated, cross-legged

Fig. 5. Three pairs of large ear spools (c. 10cm in diameter) found in Level 3 exhibiting Middle Sicán mastery over filigree work, granulation and other techniques. The top row of each pair shows the fronts, the bottom row the backs.



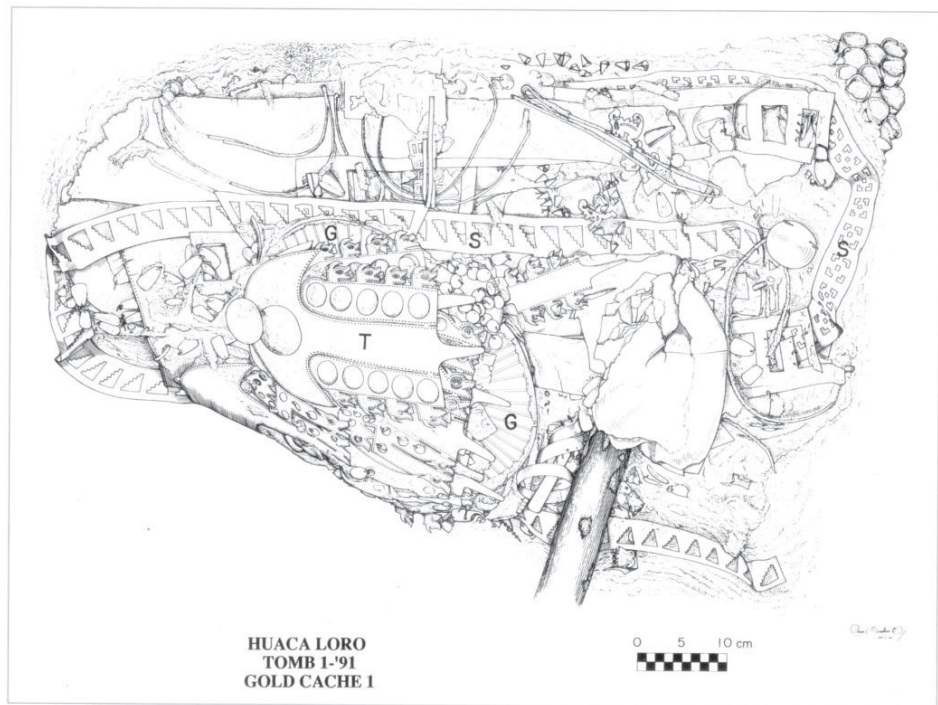


Fig. 6. Further down in Gold Cache 1. Note the additional tumi-shaped head ornaments (T) and the appearance of gold disks (G) and two long U-shaped strips with cut-out designs (S). Drawings by César Samillán.

adult male, 40–50 years in age and estimated 160cm in height (Fig. 7). The body was covered with cinnabar and wrapped in a textile with nearly 2,000 gold-alloy foil (1.5 x 1.5cm) squares originally sewn on. The upper chest area was bedecked by at least four layers of blue stone (sodalite?), quartz, agate, amethyst, chrysacolla, shell and other beads. The head was ornamented with silver ear spools and a large mask masterfully fashioned out of a single gold alloy sheet (Fig. 1). The mask was largely covered by cinnabar and had eyes represented by pierced *algarrobo* resin and emerald beads. Eye sockets and ears were covered by badly corroded silver(?) sheets.

Flanking the body and extending to the west were two 90cm long *tumbaga* (gold-copper alloy) gloves, which ended with wires and copper rods for support. It is unlikely that they were actually worn. The hand of one glove held a gold cup, as if to salute or offer a drink to someone buried farther to the west. In fact, it is highly likely that there is another major shaft tomb symmetrically situated on the west side of the long adobe platform. The other hand overlaid the top of a wooden staff with gold and *tumbaga* ornaments. For reasons still unknown, the body was seated cross-legged but upside down. Most of the gold, wooden and ceramic pieces associated with the burials were similarly found in inverted positions.

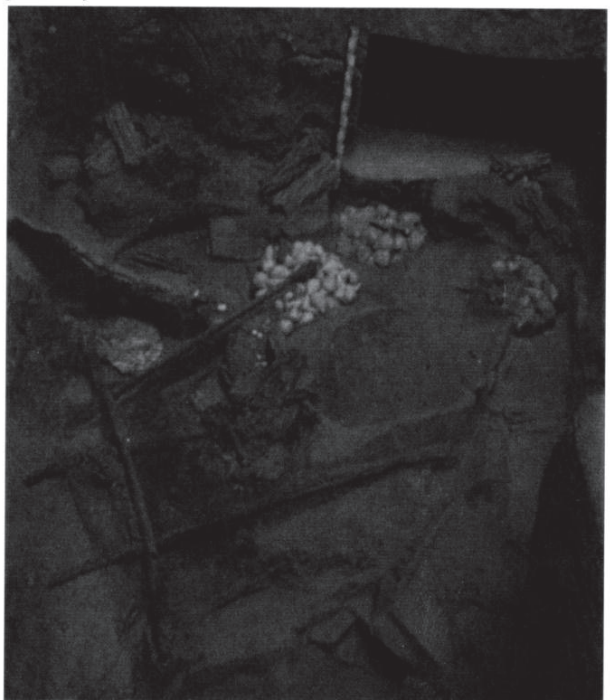
Below the body was the fifth level, containing additional items, including a *tumbaga* crown with an animal head, perhaps a boar, and a standard decorated with a tumi-shaped ornament. This level also contained two young adult female burials in the north-west corner of the chamber. Apparently they wore clothes with gold and *tumbaga* foil squares sewn on (Fig. 8).

Finally, the sixth level was represented by a nearly square pit (c. 1.8 x 1.5m) dug some 70–80cm below the floor of the burial chamber. The pit was situated at the bottom of the largest niche (Niche 1) dug into the east wall of the chamber. It was literally packed full with over 300 kilograms of *virutas metalicas*, three large clusters of beads (shell, sodalite(?), quartz and amethyst crystals,

etc.), cinnabar and limonite deposits, numerous bundles of *naipes*, at least two dozen masks and tumi-shaped head ornaments fashioned out of copper-silver alloy sheets, among others. Given the quality of the metal used, abundance, and lack of ornaments, these masks and head ornaments may have served as architectural decorations along with polychrome murals.

In reality, the burial chamber was surrounded by seven niches of varying shape and size. One niche was nothing

Fig. 7. The burial chamber with Level 3 and 4 features and grave still in place. The inverted principal burial is at the centre of the photo framed by the poles of a possible litter. At the upper right hand corner is the hole left by removal of Gold Cache 1. Note the bundles of bronze implements along west wall, piles of tropical shells, bead cluster, and two large greenish patches of *virutas metalicas*.



more than an incised outline. All others had a depth of only about 50 to 80cm. One had the burial of a child, perhaps 5–6 years of age, at its mouth. Three of the remaining niches contained only small fragments of depletion-gilded sheet metal and Niche 5 had a rectangular, mat-lined box containing some dozen gold objects such as ‘feathers’ and a rattle. The gold feathers of this cache still preserved a coating of cinnabar and fine impressions of actual bird feathers.

Without doubt the most important aspect of this tomb excavation is that; for the first time, an intact Middle Sicán elite tomb has been scientifically documented, opening the door to a wide range and various levels of artefactual and contextual analyses. Reflecting upon the power and wealth commanded by this Middle Sicán lord, the overall quantity and diversity of funerary goods found within this 3 x 3m burial chamber are remarkable for the New World: 489 cast bronze implements with a total weight of some 300kg; 141 *Conus* shells; 179 *Spondylus* shells; an estimated 600kg of *virutas metalicas* or sheet metal scraps; c. 70kg of beads; 19 ceramic vessels, and at least 80 major gold objects, among other items. Altogether, the burial chamber was packed with over 1.2 tons of varied goods.

The political power of the Sicán elite at the Huaca Loro may be gauged by his command over material resources and labour. For example, consider the quantity of bronze and gilded metal objects found in the tomb. Just to smelt some 300g or so of bronze would have taken a full day for several metalworkers, as indicated by our replicative smelting experiments. Similarly, 600kg of uniformly thin (c. 0.1mm) gilded sheet metal, though mostly scraps, represents an enormous outlay of manpower and materials. Each sheet would have been carefully produced with stone hammers.

Clearly, the Middle Sicán polity had established an extensive economic network that brought a wide range of exotic, costly goods from all over western South America. The emerald that decorated the mask probably came from the Muzo region in south-eastern Colombia. This is not surprising given that local imitations of diagnostic Sicán pedestaled bottles have been found at La Tolita at the border of Ecuador and the Colombian coast. The presence of so many *Spondylus* shells in a single elite tomb was expected from their frequent depiction in Sicán art, including harvesting of the shells by divers, and

large-scale offerings documented on top of monumental temples such as Huacas Rodillona and Las Ventanas. The network probably extended to the Marañón River, a major tributary of the Amazon River, on the eastern side of the Peruvian Andes (less than 140km east of Batán Grande). Though practically all Andean rivers carry some gold, the best known historical and modern sources of placer-mined gold are rivers on the eastern escarpment of the Peruvian Andes. In her survey of the Jaén-San Ignacio region, Ruth Shady found an appreciable quantity of Sicán ceramics. Villagers near the major modern gold mine of Poderosa overlooking the Marañón River also report finding Sicán ceramics from local, prehispanic cemeteries.

The southern limit of the network is still not clear. The notable quantity of intensely red cinnabar (c. 3.5kg) may have come from a well-known mercury mine in Huanavelica some 900km south of Batán Grande.

It would seem that underlying the impressive power and wealth of the Middle Sicán was their successful integration of a regional economy based on large scale bronze production and irrigation agriculture with inter-regional trade that had brought exotic goods, such as tropical shells imbued with religious significance, since the first millennium B.C.

In regard to Sicán social organization, the tombs described offer important insights. The Sicán tombs excavated so far clearly fall into four groups: those with (1) high carat gold objects; (2) plated and/or gilded objects; (3) bronze objects; and (4) no metal objects. This differentiation is similar to that of the Mochica tombs from Sipán and the later Inca state use of metals. The Huaca Las Ventanas tomb, in spite of its gigantic size, had only gilded and bronze objects. The Huaca Loro tomb contained all types of metal objects. There are some indications that certain shaft tombs might contain only high carat gold objects. It is thus quite possible that the Huaca Loro tomb did not represent the highest echelon of Middle Sicán society; such a tomb is probably to be found below the monumental pyramids, like the situation in Maya temples. Tentatively, we may suggest the presence of at least four social strata. Coincidentally, in terms of human labour costs and necessary skill, as well as iconographic contents, four distinct production spheres in the Middle Sicán ceramic and metal objects have been identified.

The new data from the 1991–2 excavation are quite suggestive, but the tomb sample is still inadequate to test properly the concentric model of sacred land value suggested earlier. The observed differences in shape and size between the Huaca Loro and Las Ventanas tombs appear to be in part due to the notable differences in their soil matrix. In the loose sandy area of the latter, it would be nearly impossible to excavate a vertical shaft-tomb like the former. Given the composition and number of burials found at Las Ventanas, the possibility is that this tomb contained only the bodies of court attendants of an important personage who was buried apart in a ‘companion tomb’.

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Fig. 8. One of two young women, probably sacrifices, found in the north-west corner of the burial chamber. Note the two gold foil wrapped dart/dart throwers and the upper body covered with gold foil squares and fretwork. The hand portion of one of the tumbaga gloves of the principal burial is visible on the right.

