

ARQUEOLOGÍA MOCHICA NUEVOS ENFOQUES



EDITORES

Luis Jaime Castillo Butters

Hélène Bernier

Gregory Lockard

Julio Rucabado Yong

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© Luis Jaime Castillo Butters
Hélène Bernier
Gregory Lockard
Julio Rucabado Yong

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Teléfono: (51 1) 447-6070
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LATE MOCHE PIT BURIALS FROM SAN JOSÉ DE MORO IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Colleen Donley*

One of the most significant trends in Moche archaeology, as well as archaeology as a whole, is the increasing amount of emphasis being placed on understanding the role of common people and how they functioned as important participants in political, social, ritual, and economic interactions. This paper addresses one of the three tomb types – the informal pit grave – found at the ceremonial site of San José de Moro, located in the Jequetepeque Valley. Thought to have been used by individuals of the lower rungs of the social ladder, many aspects of these tombs are substantially less complex than the chamber tombs and boot-shaped tombs that have also been found at the site. This discussion focuses on changes in the patterns of mortuary practice between the Middle and Late Moche periods, documenting shifts in the number of tombs, the proportion of pit tombs to boot-shaped tombs, the demographic profile of individuals buried in pit tombs, and specific burial practices such as orientation and the inclusion (and exclusion) of particular grave goods. This discussion will also reference other Moche sites, such as Pacatnamu, to examine change through time. It will address the significance of adherence (and non-adherence) to traditional Moche practices, and the ways in which mortuary practices may reflect shifts in social structure as a response to periods of political and social stress.

Una de las tendencias más importantes en la arqueología de la cultura Moche, y en la arqueología en general, es el creciente énfasis que se le ha otorgado al entendimiento del papel que ejerció la gente común en las interacciones políticas, sociales, rituales y económicas de las sociedades. Este trabajo está enfocado en el análisis de uno de los tres tipos de tumbas encontrados en el sitio ceremonial de San José de Moro, en el valle Jequetepeque: la tumba informal de fosa. Es probable que esta forma haya sido utilizada típicamente por la gente pobre de la sociedad moche, y haya varios aspectos de esta forma de tumba que son de menor complejidad que las cámaras y las tumbas de bota que también se han encontrado en el sitio. La discusión trata en los cambios percibidos en los patrones funerarios entre el Moche Medio y Moche Tardío, documentando cambios en la cantidad de tumbas, en la proporción de tumbas de fosa en comparación con tumbas de bota, en el perfil demográfico de las tumbas de fosa, así como en las costumbres específicas como la orientación y la inclusión (o exclusión) de ciertos bienes funerarios. Esta discusión también hace referencia a otros sitios moche, tales como Pacatnamú, con el fin de examinar estos cambios desde una perspectiva temporal. Asimismo, se destaca la importancia de la adherencia (o no adherencia) a las prácticas tradicionales moche, así como la manera en que los patrones funerarios reflejan cambios en la estructura de la sociedad como respuesta a periodos de estrés social y político.

Funerary remains frequently offer some of archaeology's best insights into the complexities of past societies. In contrast to many other types of archaeological settings, mortuary contexts are intentional and created through culturally-driven decision making, which guides such factors as the form and placement of the grave, the positioning of the body, and the selection of grave goods. As a material reflection of mortuary ritual, funerary contexts can reveal a great deal about the norms, customs, and practices that structured ancient societies. Even more importantly, tombs and mortuary practices are also responsive to transformations in these aspects of past social organization, recording cultural change through

time. Archaeologists have historically focused their efforts and attention on the tombs of the wealthy elite, rendering a grandiose yet incomplete picture of past societies. By contrast, this discussion will focus on the mortuary behavior of some of the poorer strata of a past culture in order to demonstrate the utility, and importance, of looking at social change at all levels of society.

This study analyzed 54 Late Moche informal pit burials excavated between 1999 and 2003 at the site of San José de Moro. San José de Moro is situated on the banks of the Chaman River, which is a branch of the Jequetepeque River. It is located in the northern region of the area once occupied by the Moche culture (Castillo and Donnan

* Universidad de California, Los Ángeles. Correo electrónico: cdonley@ucla.edu.



Figure 1. Major Moche sites on the North Coast of Peru, including San José de Moro and Pacatnamu.

1994:172) (figure 1). Using this sample of pit tombs, the present study addresses shifts in mortuary practices, thereby gaining insight into temporal changes in Moche social structure, as well as the dynamic social, cultural, and political landscape of the Jequetepeque Valley and the region as a whole.

The site of San José de Moro was occupied during both the Middle Moche (ca. A.D. 400-600) and the Late Moche (ca. A.D. 600-850) periods. A good portion of what has been recovered from the site comes from a cemetery and ceremonial precinct located to the east of a large adobe *huaca* (see Castillo 2003; Disselhoff 1958) (figure 2). The site has extensive evidence of ritual activity, including areas that were devoted to the production of *chicha* and other types of ritual alimentation (Delibes and Barragán, this volume). It has been postulated that the site served as a ritual center for the dispersed communities in the surrounding valley system, which would have congregated there for important

ceremonial events (Castillo 2001:309; del Carpio, this volume).

Theoretical Foundations: Mortuary Practice, Ritual, and Social Structure

One of the primary applications of mortuary data has been in the study of ancient social structure. Questions of status, or vertical social organization, were some of the first aspects of social structure to receive theoretical attention from archaeologists studying burial patterns. It was argued that mortuary data provide an important window into the status position occupied by the deceased during life, and the analysis of a collection of graves could be used to study the hierarchical structure of the society as a whole (Binford 1971; Tainter 1978). In particular, comparisons of energy expended in specific aspects of mortuary behavior were used to develop relative measures of social status (Binford 1971:18, 21; Tainter 1978:125-127). It is currently recognized, however, that all conclusions drawn from the burial record must be tempered with the understanding that mortuary contexts are the product of ritual and social behavior that may come between the real-life status of an individual and its material representation in the grave (Carr 1995; Hodder 1982; Kamp 1998; Ucko 1969). Other aspects of funerary practice are thought to encompass and symbolize horizontal social affiliations. O'Shea (1984:46-47, 1996: 294) and Pader (1982:18) have postulated that horizontal social ties may be commemorated in burials through the use of «unvaluable» perishable materials, such as hair arrangement and styling, tattoos, clothing, personal adornment, orientation, and various other physical aspects important to group identification.

Although social structure has been used to encompass the vertical and horizontal relationships between individuals within a society, more recent work has broadened the usage of the term to include the cultural norms, values, beliefs, and practices that create and maintain these status relationships. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) and his work

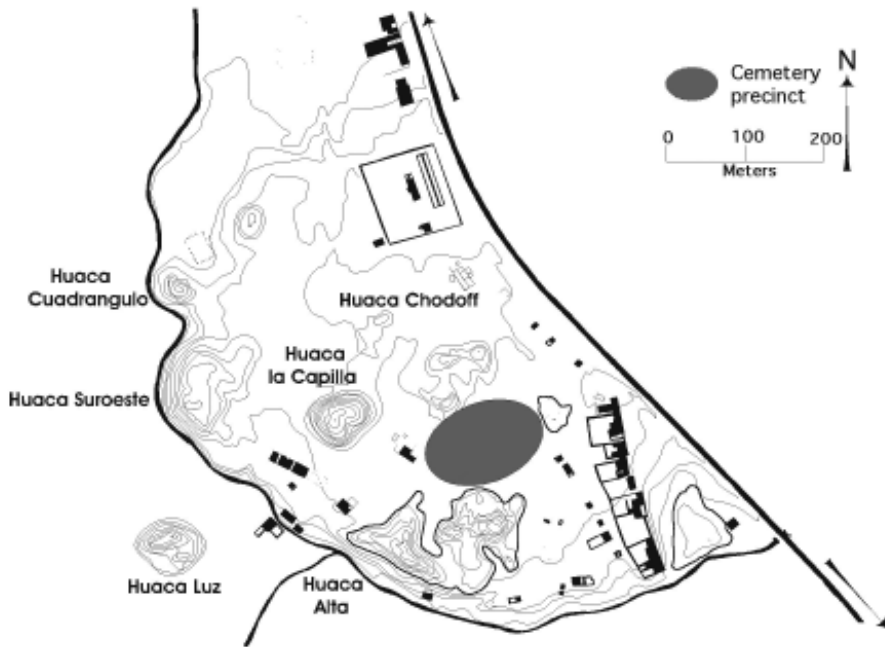


Figure 2. Map of San José de Moro, indicating the location of the cemetery precinct.

with the theory of structuration have been integral to this change in perspective. Giddens regards structure as the «rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction» (1984:xxx), allowing for culture to exist as a system across both space and time. Giddens (1984:162) suggests that human agency and social structure are in a dialectic relationship with each other, in which social structure does not exist as an entity except in that it is reproduced through the repetitive actions of individual agents, who are themselves guided consciously or unconsciously by the rules and norms that society creates. This means that there are ways in which society is structured – traditions, institutions, moral codes, and established ways of doing things – that influence the worldview of a particular individual. It also suggests that these aspects of society can be changed when people start to ignore them, replace them, or reproduce them in a different manner. In the words of Ian Morris, social structure is defined as the «taken-for-granted

norms about roles and rules that make up a society – relationships of power, affection, deference, rights, duties, and so on» (1992:7).

In its application to the field of archaeology, the concept of social structure has been operationalized through the study of ritual, influenced by the work of Maurice Bloch (1977). Bloch (1977: 286) argues that ritual may be one arena of social interaction where aspects of social structure are made explicit, and therefore provides a view into the underlying structure of ideals, social roles, and cultural norms. In addition, as a type of social gathering, funerals and associated mortuary rituals are also a locus of power and interaction, where the status quo is projected into the timeless world of the supernatural, naturalizing and normalizing the identities and inequalities that make up social organization. The material record left behind by funerary activities, including both pre- and post-interment rituals, is thus a vital window into the social structure of past cultures.

Mortuary rituals can provide particularly important insights into the intersection between social status and underlying social norms and customs due to the fact that funerals are «different in each performance because the central character, the deceased, changes with each repetition. The ritual must be adjusted to reflect the specific individual involved. At the same time, the ritual connects the specific event to all such occurrences» (Beck 1995:171). How an individual is treated in death can be seen as reflective of the degree to which the individual was included or excluded from particular economic, symbolic, and ideological systems. Status and social norms can play an important role, for example, in whether or not particular individuals are included in formal cemeteries, the manner in which they are interred, or whether they have access to the same types, quality, or abundance of grave goods as others within the cemetery. In one example, Morris (1987:95-96) asserts that the poor in ancient Athens were excluded from formal burials, but that this practice changed through time in response to other social phenomena. He uses these shifts in customs to account for diachronic changes in age structures and composition of cemetery populations. He draws a distinction «not between burial and non-burial, but between *formal* disposal, in the subterranean facilities discovered in archaeological excavations, and *informal* disposals, still constituting a rite of passage for all the actors, but in a manner very different from that of the observed burials, and leaving little or no identifiable material residue» (Morris 1987:105, his emphasis). Examples of this type of disposal include informal placement in large pits, a practice that occurred in Late Republican Rome and left little archaeological evidence (Morris 1987:105).

On the other hand, John Papadopoulos makes the case that there are «various categories of exclusion to formal burial that not only survive in the material record, but are blatantly visible» (2000:97). He has documented a number of Greek burials in wells and other contexts whose divergence from the typical contemporary burial patterns suggest that they were the tombs of socially marginalized individuals, perhaps including individuals that were simply of

low status and thus excluded from the mainstream burial practice. One example documents a series of nine burials in a well at Eleusis in west Attica. The well was located near a contemporaneous cemetery, which means that the individuals were interred «close to a formal burial ground, but somehow separate from it and [in] a manner of disposal atypical for the time» (Papadopoulos 2000:108).

O'Shea (1996) also makes an argument for the importance of standard and non-standard burial practices. He underlines the normative role of funerary treatment, which «establishes the basic set of activities or forms that represent the *proper* treatment of the dead» (O'Shea 1996:140, his emphasis). Adherence to standard burial practices, including placement within a formal cemetery, orientation of the grave, grave form, and other aspects of burial traditions, can serve to «draw a symbolic distinction between the community and the outside... and deviation from normative treatment may serve to mark other categories of individuals, who, in one sense or another, do not fit the definition of community member» (O'Shea 1996:140).

Recent studies (Bawden 2001; Morris 1987; 1992; Schachner 2001) have been successful in demonstrating that shifts in rituals, particularly those associated with death and burial, can be closely tied to changes in the social norms and beliefs that structure ritual practice. Cultural norms tend to change gradually through time, but others have argued that more dramatic shifts in the principles that underlie social organization can be the result of societal stress, perhaps as a result of substantial and persistent fluctuations in resource abundance, availability, and predictability, particularly when coupled with social or environmental circumscription (Aldenderfer 1993:12). These circumstances provide an arena in which individuals and groups may more effectively bring about structural change to ritual and social order (Schachner 2001).

Tombs Types at San José de Moro

Excavations have yielded three different tomb types at the site of San José de Moro. Adobe-lined chambers containing elaborately-made ceramics



Figure 3. Typical *informal* burial (M-U1121).

and metal objects, as well as camelid and human sacrifices, are assumed to have contained some of the Moche's highest elites (Castillo 2000:116-117; 2001:308-309; Donnan and Castillo 1994:424). In addition, a number of boot-shaped tombs, so named for their appearance in cross-section, have been found at the site (Castillo 2001:312; del Carpio, this volume). These tombs also frequently contained fine ceramics, including low-relief or fineline stirrup spout vessels, as well as other grave goods, such as copper implements and camelid limbs and crania as sacrifices. These tombs are thought to have been utilized by middle class to lower-level elite individuals (see del Carpio, this volume). This tomb form has only been found at San José de Moro and at the nearby site of Pacatnamu (Ubbelohde-Doering 1983). Although these sites are both temporally and functionally distinct, the presence of boot-shaped tombs demonstrates a clear association in mortuary customs between the sites.

The last and least understood tomb type, which will be the primary topic of the rest of this paper, is that of the informal pit grave (figure 3). These have been designated as «*informales*» (i.e., informal pit tombs) by the San José de Moro Archaeological Project, in part because they do not appear to have the same degree of formal complexity or adherence to standard mortuary practices exhibited by other tomb types at the site or at other sites in the valley (see discussion of Morris 1987 above). Based on osteological analyses (Bernuy 2003; Haun 2000; Tomasto 1999, 2000, 2002), lower levels of energy investment in construction, and smaller numbers and the generally poor quality of grave goods, it is likely that these tombs were utilized by Moche commoners.

There are many ways in which these individuals were interred following typical Moche burial practices (see Donnan 1995). They were buried extended and lying on their backs, with their hands parallel to the body. This is in keeping with standard Moche body position (e.g., Donnan and

Mackey 1978; Tello *et al.* 2003). Textile imprints on some of the bones suggest that they were wrapped in burial shrouds, also thought to be characteristic of Moche burial practices (Donnan and McClelland 1997:28). The burial population included women, men, children, and infants. Although they are interesting in their own right, an analysis of these tombs reveals a number of important shifts between the Middle and Late Moche periods, especially when put in perspective with the contemporary boot-shaped tombs used by the middle and upper classes.¹

A Comparison of the Middle and Late Moche Periods: Data from San José de Moro

Although some data regarding mortuary practices in the Middle Moche Period at San José de Moro have not yet been published (but see del Carpio, this volume), a count of the Middle Moche tomb types and basic demographic data were available for comparison with the Late Moche pit tomb sample that was the basis of this investigation. Focusing on the differences in mortuary practice between the Middle and Late Moche periods, this study documents shifts in the number of tombs, the proportion of pit tombs to boot-shaped tombs, the demographic profile of individuals buried in pit tombs, and specific burial practices.

A comparison of the Middle and Late Moche periods reveals a significant increase in the sheer number of tombs in the later period (figure 4). Although it is difficult to be certain of the factors responsible for this increase, it is likely that it represents a phase of more intensive use of the ceremonial and cemetery precinct during which a greater number of people were buried there (Castillo 2001:309). This scenario is supported, in part, by the increased amounts of ceremonial activity, especially involving *chicha* production, which appears to have taken place in the cemetery precinct in the Late Moche Period (Delibes and Barragán, this volume).

There is also a dramatic shift in the proportions of pit tombs between the Middle and Late Moche periods. In the Middle Moche sample, pit tombs

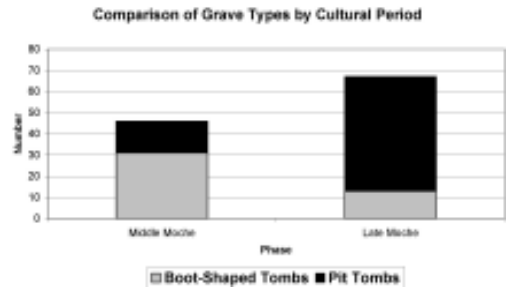


Figure 4. Chart showing the increase in both the total numbers of tombs and the proportion of pit tombs in the Late Moche Period.

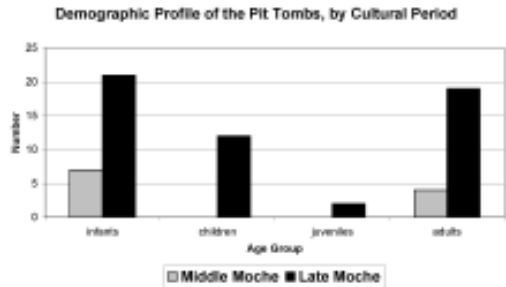


Figure 5. Chart showing the shifts in the mortality profile of individuals buried in pit tombs between the Middle and Late Moche periods.

represent only about a third of the total individuals buried, the rest being interred in boot-shaped tombs. In the Late Moche Period, however, there was a clear increase in the proportion of individuals buried in pit tombs, while the percentage of boot tombs decreased significantly.

Focusing strictly on pit tombs, analysis revealed an additional change in the mortality profile of the individuals buried in these tombs between the Middle and Late Moche periods (figure 5). During the Middle Moche Period, infants and a very small number of adults were buried in pit tombs. This changes significantly in the Late Moche Period. All age groups that make up a living population are represented in the Late Moche sample, and in more or less the proportions predicted by a U-shaped mortality curve characteristic of pre-industrial populations (see Verano 1997:191-192). Children

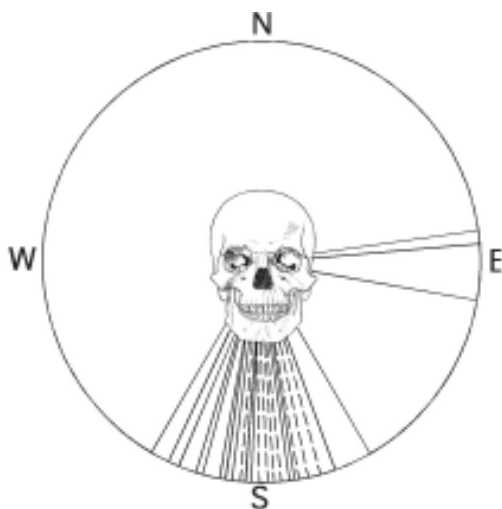


Figure 6. Distribution of pit tomb orientation at Pacatnamu.

and juveniles, absent from the Middle Moche sample, make up appropriate proportions of the population, and the number of infants appears to triple.

Numerous factors likely worked in conjunction to cause this change. Given the increase in ceremonial activity at the site described above, a larger number of people, both from the immediate area and from outlying communities, were spending time at the site. As the amount of time spent in ceremonial activity at the site increased, it is likely that a greater range of individuals would have died natural deaths during the course of the preparation and enactment of different ceremonial activities, and then been buried while festivities were taking place.² Additionally, both the increase in the number of pit tombs and the inclusion of a broader demographic range seem to indicate that it was now considered appropriate for individuals of this social status to be buried in the cemetery precinct. This argues for an increase in the permeability of the cemetery boundaries, opening this ritual space to the commoner segment of the population (see Morris 1987). The increase in the number of pit tombs during the Late Moche Period could also be interpreted, in light of some of the data presented below, as indicative of increasing levels of social

stratification during the Late Moche Period, with the proportion of commoners expanding.

A number of specific mortuary practices also appear to have changed between the Middle and Late Moche periods. This assertion will be illustrated by a comparison with a Middle Moche commoner cemetery excavated by Christopher Donnan and his team at the near-by site of Pacatnamu (Donnan and McClelland 1997). This sample consists of 61 pit tombs. It is a good comparative sample for the pit tombs at San José de Moro because of the similar types and amounts of grave goods and the degree of energy expenditure in tomb construction. In addition, it has a comparable demographic profile.

One aspect of the funerary practice that appears to have changed between the Middle and Late Moche periods is body orientation. Cross-cultural ethnographic studies have demonstrated that body orientation is closely associated with philosophical and religious factors (Carr 1995:157), indicating that following a common body orientation was likely a significant part of a coherent Moche mortuary practice. In addition, orientation is also important for marking group affiliations, including both vertical and horizontal social relationships (Binford 1971:22; O'Shea 1996:149-168). At the site of Pacatnamu, a common orientation of the tombs was observed for almost all of the individuals in the sample (figure 6; orientations calculated from Donnan and McClelland 1997). Most individuals were buried with their heads to the south, with the exception of a few who are buried with their heads to the east. All of the dashed lines in figure 6 indicate orientations that have three or more individuals. Some of these orientations have up to nine or ten individuals. This strong correlation in orientation indicates that although there is some small variation, most individuals are within approximately twenty degrees of one another, a pattern which is clearly not random.

In contrast, the pattern from San José de Moro is much more variable (figure 7). There are no orientations with three or more individuals. Although there does appear to be some order to the orientations, it is clear that the individuals burying their dead did not place as much emphasis on

following a common alignment. This could speak to a breakdown in local burial customs, or could indicate that these individuals may not have warranted burial under the supervision of religious elites who would have ensured that the proper Moche orientation was followed. They may have, in fact, been excluded from the funerary rituals that were accorded the Moche elite. It is additionally possible that the variation in orientation reflects tensions and ruptures in group relations in the Jequetepeque Valley during the Late Moche Period, although as noted by del Carpio (this volume), San José de Moro may have played an integrative role in this climate of conflict.

One further shift between Middle and Late Moche mortuary practice is in the prevalence of metal in pit tombs. It was considered standard Moche burial practice to include some metal object, usually copper, in the mouth and sometimes also the hands of the deceased (Donnan 1995:147). Although this is probably related to the social status and access to metal objects of the deceased and the individuals responsible for their interment, the inclusion and placement of this form of grave offering was also likely guided by a set of important ritual beliefs. During the Middle Moche Period at the site of Pacatnamu, the presence of metal was widespread in commoner burials – it was found in 50 out of 61 of the graves (or almost 80 percent). In addition, as noted by del Carpio (this volume), virtually all of the Middle Moche boot-shaped tombs from San José de Moro also contain some type of metal object. In contrast, as depicted in figure 8, only 6 out of 54 (or slightly more than 10 percent) of the Late Moche pit graves from San José de Moro contained any metal at all. There are two likely, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, explanations for this phenomenon. One is that commoners had reduced access to metal during the Late Moche Period, which can be seen as supporting the notion that social stratification increased during this period. Many of the Late Moche Period chamber and boot-shaped tombs, representing the middle and upper strata of society, contain significant amounts of metallic objects, while pit tombs used by commoners in this period do not. It is also possible that this non-

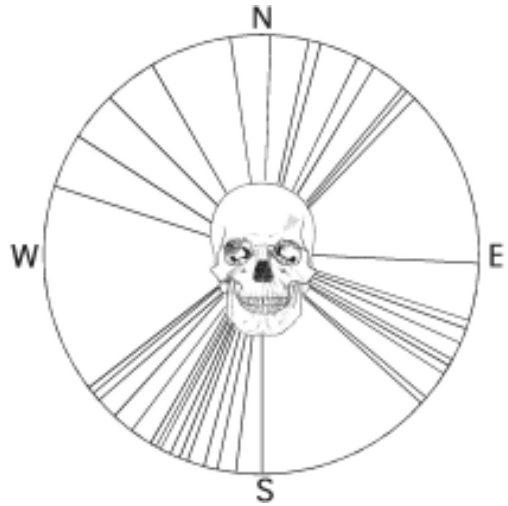


Figure 7. Distribution of pit tomb orientation at San José de Moro.

adherence to traditional mortuary practice is reflective of a lack of strong ties to the dominant ideology, as well as possible changes in the beliefs that guided how individuals of this social status were buried. This hypothesis is further bolstered by the lack of consistent orientation manifested by the Late Moche pit tombs at San José de Moro.

Discussion and Conclusions

As evidenced by the analysis of the sample of pit tombs, significant transformations in the organization of Moche society in the Jequetepeque Valley appear to have taken place between the Middle and Late Moche periods. These changes are represented by shifts in the mortuary patterns of boot-shaped tombs as well. The work of other archaeologists (Castillo 2001:318-319; del Carpio, this volume) has established that there are important differences between Middle and Late Moche boot-shaped tombs at San José de Moro, including changes in the quality and quantity of ceramics. This is represented most dramatically by the presence of fineline ceramics in Late Moche but not Middle Moche boot-shaped tombs. It has been argued that Late Moche individuals buried in boot-shaped tombs constitute a «second

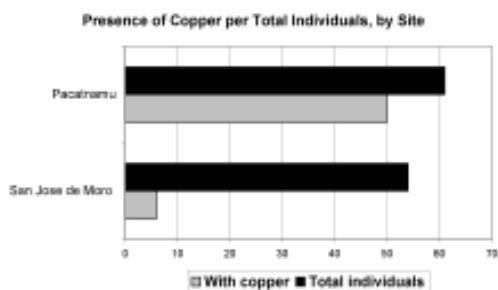


Figure 8. Comparison of the prevalence of copper in pit tombs at Pacatnamú and San José de Moro.

rank of elites» (Castillo 2001:215) that was smaller in numbers, but had a higher status than the Moche «middle class» (Nelson 1998:194) that primarily composed the burial population interred in boot-shaped tombs during the Middle Moche Period.

The shrinking of this «middle class» and the concurrent expansion of the population of commoners using the cemetery precinct to bury their dead, as evidenced by the increase in the proportion of pit tombs, seem to imply that the organization of the Moche social world was changing. Levels of social stratification were increasing. Individuals buried within boot-shaped tombs and chamber tombs constitute several different ranks of a Late Moche elite class that had greater access to wealth and more interest in elaborate mortuary display than was seen during the Middle Moche Period at the site. At the same time, the portion of the population living as commoners may have expanded, or the cemetery may have simply become more permeable to the mortuary efforts of this social stratum.

The funerary practices of individuals burying their dead in pit tombs also appear to have changed. During the Late Moche Period at San José de Moro, individuals utilizing pit tombs were less concerned with following a standard orientation than during the Middle Moche Period. In addition, there was a dramatic decline in the use of metal, which had been ubiquitous even among the tombs of commoners during the Middle Moche Period. These shifts are related to changes in social organization, including the widening gulf between elites and commoners, and may be reflective of the exclusion of the lower

segment of the burial population from the dominant ideological system that governed elite mortuary practice. It could additionally indicate that the cultural norms underlying these burial customs were no longer as important or relevant to the individuals burying their dead in pit tombs, and could thus be interpreted as a breakdown in aspects of the shared religious and cultural tradition.

Although we need to conduct more research and excavation of additional archaeological contexts, I argue that these changes in mortuary practices are linked to larger social and political processes at work in the Jequetepeque Valley after the Middle Moche/Late Moche transition. Works by Dillehay (2001), Johnson (this volume), Swenson (2004, this volume), and others suggest that the increase in social tension and political fragmentation, perhaps underlain by climatic and political instability, are indicated by changing settlement distributions as well as by the construction of fortified sites during the Late Moche Period. Shifts in the funerary practices of individuals burying their dead in pit tombs at San José de Moro indicate that the effects of these processes were not limited to the elite. Rather, changes in cultural norms and social organization affected all strata of Moche society.

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Notes

¹ Millaire (2004: 374) has argued that patterns in burial context, tomb type, energy expenditure, and other aspects of Moche funerary behavior appear to correspond well with the status and roles that the dead held in life. This notion underlies the rather general class divisions (i.e., lower, middle, and upper) that I and other Moche scholars use, although it must be noted that they exist on a sliding scale and are valid only when considered relative to other tombs from the same site and others within the Moche sphere. The three-tier system appears apt for the three types of burials found at San José de Moro, although we must be cautious to avoid approaching the tomb assemblage with preconceived notions of the status of tomb occupants.

² Although it appears that some of the individuals buried in boot-shaped tombs may have been transported from elsewhere and/or undergone prolonged funerary rites (Millaire 2004; Nelson 1998; Nelson and Castillo 1997; del Carpio, this volume), this is not true of individuals buried in pit tombs. These individuals do not manifest evidence of pre-interment disarticulation. In addition, these tombs do not appear to have any particular spatial organization, supporting the notion that they were buried upon death without any regard for familial grouping (as seen in the Middle Moche boot-shaped tombs reported by del Carpio, this volume; see also Castillo 2000: 113).

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