

Ceramic variation and negotiated communities in the Late Valdivia phase of coastal Ecuador



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 November 2014
Revision received 25 May 2016
Available online 7 June 2016

Keywords:

Negotiated communities
Ceramic analysis
Valdivia
Ecuador

ABSTRACT

Previous research of prehispanic coastal Ecuador has argued for the development of social hierarchies during the Late Valdivia period (2400–1800 BCE), based on changing regional settlement patterns, increased long-distance exchange, and increasing intra-site differentiation. Recent investigations at Valdivia sites have highlighted the diversity of settlement patterns and social forms during this period. The present research utilizes a negotiated community framework to investigate practices of community formation and maintenance. Through a comparative analysis of ceramic assemblages from four Late Valdivia sites I highlight differences in ceramic use and assemblage composition that indicate diverging ways of fomenting community through participation in communal eating. These differences point to the negotiated nature of communities, highlighting differing strategies for community maintenance at different sites, and emphasizing the contingent nature of increasing social complexity within Valdivia society.

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1. Introduction

Research across the social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, and economics, has identified “community” as a meaningful scale at which to investigate the negotiation of social relationships, power dynamics, and identity politics. The last fifteen years have brought about renewed and intense archaeological investigation of “communities” with a critical assessment of the many assumptions underlying previous community studies (e.g., Canuto and Yaeger, 2000; Varien and Potter, 2008; Varien and Wilshusen, 2002). These new approaches build on theories of practice (*sensu* Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984), and see “community” as a dynamic entity, created by ongoing structured activities located in space and time and subject to historical contingencies (Anderson, 1991; Cohen, 1985).

Dated between 4400 and 1450 BCE, known as the Early Formative Period in Ecuadorian archaeology (Table 1), Valdivia occupation spanned much of the coastal plain of Ecuador (Fig. 1). For decades this period has drawn the interest of scholars due to three factors. First, Valdivia is one of the earliest ceramic traditions of the Americas (Hill, 1972–1974; Meggers et al., 1965) and was originally proposed as the earliest. Second, during this period on the coast of Ecuador many of the standard crops of this region, such as maize, were brought under widespread cultivation (Pearsall, 2003, 2008). This early presence of agriculture in Ecuador was in contrast with

what appeared to be greater social complexity in the non-agricultural societies of Peru (e.g., Moseley, 1975). Finally, Valdivia occupation of coastal Ecuador marks the beginning of sedentary village life in this region (Lathrap et al., 1977). Though never “complex” in the traditional understanding of the term (e.g., Johnson and Earle, 1987; Price and Feinman, 1995), evidence that the first institutionalized hierarchies on the coast of Ecuador developed during the Valdivia period does exist (Zeidler, 1991). By the Late Valdivia period further evidence for widespread distribution of these social hierarchies has appeared, but this evidence was not equally present across Valdivia settlements.

In this article I situate ceramic analysis within a negotiated community framework to explore the variable development of social hierarchies within Valdivia society. Ceramics provide a particularly useful window into Valdivia community practices for two main reasons. First, they are ubiquitous and abundant at Valdivia sites. Secondly, Valdivia ceramics were likely produced by the very people who used them (Lopez Muñoz, 2001), meaning that variation in vessel form, size, and decoration are closely linked to the needs and desires of the people who used them. To date, analyses of Valdivia ceramic have tended to characterize individual assemblages without examining the ways in which they differ from each other. I draw on materials recovered during my dissertation research at the site of Buen Suceso (Rowe, 2014) and other theses (Lippi, 1980; Lopez Muñoz, 2001; Marcos, 1978) to conduct a comparative analysis of ceramic assemblages from four Late Valdivia sites. This comparison highlights the variation that existed

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Table 1
Brief chronology of the Valdivia cultural sequence (from Zeidler (2003)).

Early Valdivia	4400–3000 BCE
Middle Valdivia	3000–2400 BCE
Late Valdivia	2400–1800 BCE
Terminal Valdivia	1800–1450 BCE

between communities, identifying two main ways of fomenting community through commensal events, and ultimately pointing to the need for locally-developed and historicized examinations of social processes within this period.

2. Negotiated communities

Isbell (2000) perceptively divided the long history of the community concept in both cultural anthropology and archaeology

into two main groups: those authors who treat community as the (physical) locus for social interaction and reproduction and those who treat community as itself socially constructed through individual and group practice. Isbell characterized these two approaches as, respectively, the “natural” and “imagined” approaches to communities.

The “natural communities” approach had its roots in early studies in cultural anthropology and sociology which emphasized communities as relatively static, closed, and bounded entities defined on the basis of residential proximity and a shared, normative conception of culture (Arensberg, 1955; Hollingshead, 1948; Murdock, 1949; Redfield, 1963[1955]; Wolf, 1957). Examples of the application of the “natural community” concept within archaeology are numerous and characterize many of the early efforts to engage with the community concept through the material record of the past. Kolb and Snead (1997:611) defined a community as “a mini-

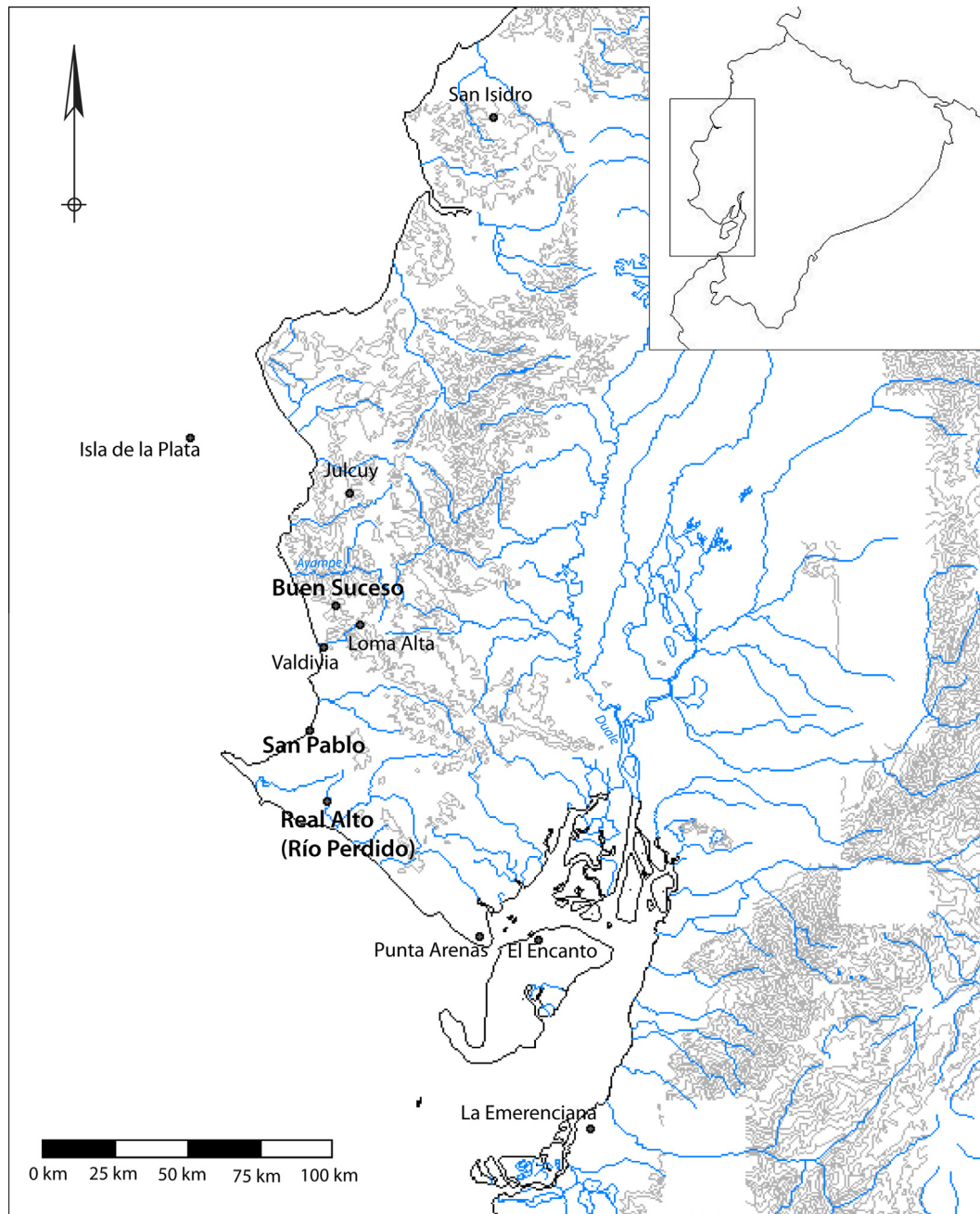


Fig. 1. Selected Late Valdivia sites, with sites included in the comparative analysis in bold.

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