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# Political centers in context: Depositional histories at Formative Period Kala Uyuni, Bolivia



Andrew P. Roddick<sup>a,\*</sup>, Maria C. Bruno<sup>b</sup>, Christine A. Hastorf<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>McMaster University, Department of Anthropology, 1280 Main Street West Hamilton, ON L8S 4L9, Canada

<sup>b</sup>Dickinson College, Department of Anthropology/Archaeology, PO Box 1773, Carlisle, PA 17013, United States

<sup>c</sup>University of California, Berkeley, Department of Anthropology, 232 Kroeber Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-3710, United States

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the development of a Middle Formative (800–200 BC) village and a Late Formative (200 BC–AD 475) political center at the site of Kala Uyuni on the Taraco Peninsula, Bolivia. Traditional political economy models rely on the spatial distribution of archaeological sites documented through site survey to define and explain the appearance of political centers. Recent scholarship on ‘depositional histories’ offers a framework for interpreting the dynamic and contingent political histories of such places using rich, stratigraphically excavated data. Our approach sheds new light on the diversity of practices and internally complex political processes that contributed to the transformation of Kala Uyuni from village to political center. We argue that serious attention to such ‘depositional histories’ has the potential to transform larger archaeological narratives in the region, and contribute to a more subtle understanding of the development of political landscapes.

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, archaeologists have begun to re-conceptualize ancient political landscapes, stressing the role of culturally situated strategic actions and practices that create differences and unique histories within communities (Bauer, 2011: 85; Johansen and Bauer, 2011; Smith, 2011; Yoffee, 2005). These researchers are questioning many taken-for-granted of earlier political studies (Pauketat, 2007; Smith, 2003), exploring the “practical politics” of everyday life, the continual dynamic interactions between different communities and the heterarchical nature of political landscapes (Crumley, 1995; Janusek, 2004, 2008; Pauketat, 2000; Silliman, 2001). Some authors focus upon the political nature of the associated material culture and its ability to produce subjects (Brumfiel, 1997, 2011; DeMarrais et al., 1996; Gell, 1998; Rowlands, 2005; Smith, 2011: 425). Others explore the politics of place-making and the practices of locality (D’Altroy and Hastorf, 2001; Heckenberger, 2005; Kosiba, 2011). These archaeologists understand that the local not only reflects the political, but in fact, the local actually produces the political programs that are visible across geopolitical landscapes. Such an understanding is particularly important for research into political centers, those centrifugal,

independent and generative places where emergent forms of power and influence were displayed and negotiated (Cobb and King, 2005; Janusek, 2004; Sassaman, 2005).

In this paper we contribute to this literature by exploring the political practices, specifically those depositional practices, that constituted an important Formative Period political center in highland Bolivia. Our discussion is structured by a distinction between “horizontal” and “vertical” approaches to political dynamics, a difference that involves varying methods and spatio-temporal resolution, but most importantly, a fundamentally distinct understanding of political process. As we discuss below, the horizontal approach is primarily developed through survey-based methodologies and has a particularly broad spatial resolution and perspective with less attention to the micro-processes of political practices. Such an approach has often been geared towards tracking the emergence of social stratification and the development of regional institutions (i.e. political economy). In contrast the “vertical approach” stresses particular events in the biography of particular places, offering a fine-grained stratigraphic perspectives. Here, more attention is paid to the relationship between structural power, strategic power, and social action (Wolf, 1990: 586–587) and to exploring how small, place-based politicized acts can generate larger sociopolitical changes (Mills and Walker, 2008; Pollard, 2001; Walker and Lucero, 2000).

While the vertical and horizontal are not mutually exclusive, we suggest that the vertical depositional data is often subsumed in lar-

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [roddick@mcmaster.ca](mailto:roddick@mcmaster.ca) (A.P. Roddick), [brunom@dickinson.edu](mailto:brunom@dickinson.edu) (M.C. Bruno), [hastorf@berkeley.edu](mailto:hastorf@berkeley.edu) (C.A. Hastorf).

ger political economy narratives, rather than serving to re-evaluate how political relations were constituted in the past.

Our research has explored the inner workings of Formative Period political centers in the Lake Titicaca Basin of the Andes. In this paper, we examine the political processes that played out at the site of Kala Uyuni located on the Taraco Peninsula in the southern Lake Titicaca basin in Bolivia based on our excavations there (Fig. 1). Matthew Bandy developed a political economic model of population growth and centralization based on a full-coverage survey of the peninsula. Much like similar work in the larger basin and elsewhere, this “horizontal” model tracked settlement pattern changes across the region, sketched out variation in the regional demography and political economy, and effectively identified the site of Kala Uyuni as an important place in Formative times. Nevertheless, the internal dynamics of political centers recorded in the “vertical” depositional processes at settlements such as Kala Uyuni have not been explored in depth. Detailed excavation data allow us to engage directly with several key questions pertaining to political practices within the Formative settlements during these periods of polity formation. What evidence do we have for political subject-making and authority at Kala Uyuni throughout the Formative period? More specifically, what does political authority look like during a period of early, stable, autonomous village formation in the Middle Formative? And how do politically inflected practices change in the Late Formative when there appears to be a centripetal movement of population? The approach taken here permits a closer view of this history through tracing various practices that produced the settlements categorized as *political centers* by Titicaca basin researchers, exploring how the political was enacted *within* these communities over time. This focus allows us to trace the history of social life and engagement at Kala Uyuni in light of the greater political landscape of the Taraco Peninsula during the Formative Period, but also to consider how a focus on depositional processes can provide clearer perspectives on political life and processes within early autonomous centers.

## 2. Political practices and depositional histories

### 2.1. Breaking into the “black box” of the political center

For much of the 20th century, Americanist archaeology focused on the political from a specific theoretical paradigm, which shaped

both the kinds of questions being asked and the scales and methods deemed appropriate to explore the political. This approach, which might be called a “horizontal history”, theorized the formation of regional political economies as unilinear trajectories of accumulation, centralization and aggrandizement (Pauketat, 2007). This paradigm stressed these regional political developments and thus relied almost exclusively on data produced from survey projects. This focus is on the dynamics of site size and related population densities through time, with such patterning used as proxies for the emergence of administrative institutions and regional political authority (e.g. Billman and Feinman, 1999; Marcus and Flannery, 1996; Wright and Johnson, 1975).

This horizontal approach has focused on exploring regional political processes and identifying particularly important places on the landscape. Scholars identify particularly large places, often defined as “political centers”, which are interpreted as something akin to prehistoric performative stages and are often used to index political developmental stages (Kosiba, 2010: 298). While such approaches have mapped out the low-resolution political processes across the landscape, they have been less successful in understanding the making of such places. While regional authority and associated institutions were thought to emerge at such sites, the diachronic micro-politics of place-making and daily life were rarely considered. In some cases, excavated site-level data seemed less weighty within narratives of political development, or even was ignored to fit into these larger “horizontal histories” (Joyce, 2002). As a result, political centers became a sort of “black box”, as archaeologists were thought to have little data to speak to the political processes that actually produced such centers, the temporalities involved in their evolution, and how particular social relations within (and between) such places were distinct from other sites in the greater political landscape.

In many of these “horizontal histories” elites dominate the political arena and emphasis is on elite authority structures, strategies, and prestige competition (Clark and Blake, 1994; Earle, 1993, 1997; Brumfiel and Earle, 1987; Stanish, 1999). Indeed, elite actors are “implicitly or explicitly at the fore of social action” (Costin, 2007: 144). So-called “commoners” played little to no role in the sociopolitical processes in the past; elites are thought to provide managerial role and their tactics and strategies dominate these narratives. Other scholars have recently stressed how these particular orientations of political economy and their associated materialist framings have resulted in a lack of attention to other important aspects from symbolic elements, meaning and the

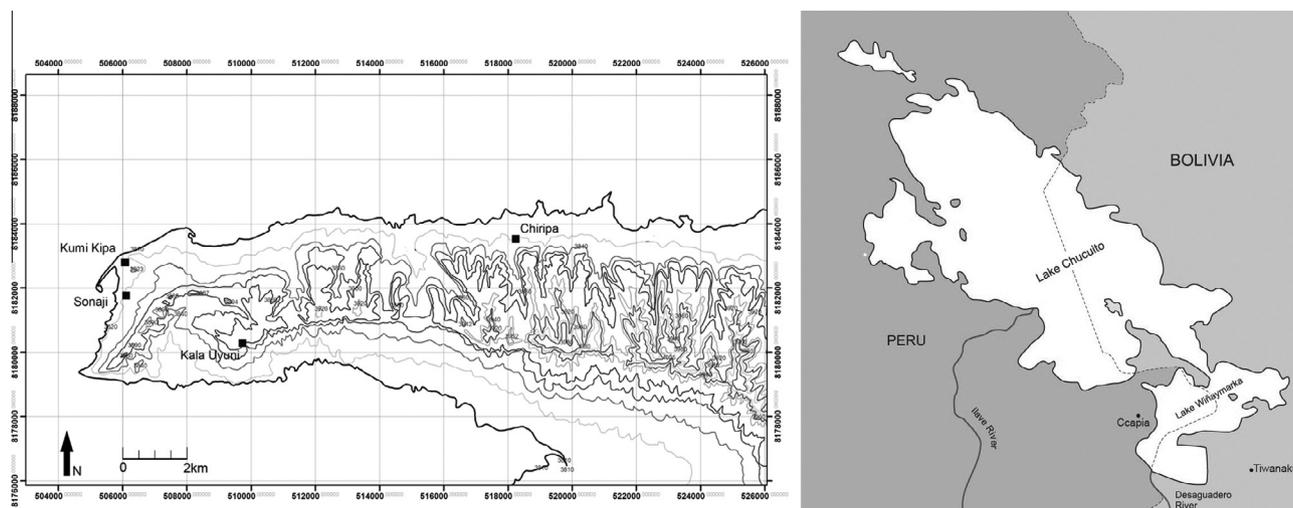


Fig. 1. Map of the Lake Titicaca Basin and Taraco Peninsula with sites mentioned in text.

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