

Muisca settlement organization and chiefly authority at Suta, Valle de Leyva, Colombia: A critical appraisal of native concepts of house for studies of complex societies

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Abstract

This paper argues that native categories of the house are useful analytic units when coupled with models of complex society that distinguish between individualistic and institutional sources of political authority. This approach strengthens archaeological research by examining objectively the scale of political inequality associated with house societies. We discuss the complex associations between the Muisca sense of place, residential architecture, and political authority and propose hypotheses to evaluate whether ideas about house and place were a source of either individualistic or institutional political authority. By documenting whole settlement patterns at Suta, in the Valley of Leyva between the 11th and 17th centuries, this paper analyzes the degree to which Muisca chiefs at Suta drew on ideas about the house to directly control the internal spatial organization of a whole settlement. Systematic shovel test probes are used to identify residential locations, internal settlement organization, and site boundaries. Spatial analysis of these house locations suggests that the formation this nucleated settlement beginning in the 11th century was a product of inter-house alliances and individualistic patterns of political leadership. The results of this study suggest that political elites at Suta drew upon the Muisca house, a multifaceted symbol, to legitimate their political authority and create a central place with their own residential compounds, but that they had no direct control over other houses.

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This study contributes to recent research on house societies (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Helms, 1998; Joyce and Gillespie, 2000) by using the Muisca concept of house, or *gue*, as an analytic unit for interpreting archaeological settlement patterns and for expanding on models of complex society that distinguish between

individual and institutional sources of political authority (Blanton et al., 1996; Drennan, 1995a; Renfrew, 1974). The Muisca house was an expansive concept, a multifaceted symbol reflecting a wholistic Muisca world view that similar to other house societies (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995) incorporated broad notions of place, time, and the body. We examine a series of Muisca words that incorporated the house concept to understand the complex associations between house, place, and political authority and the relevance of these native

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concepts to individualistic and institutional sources political authority. Moreover, we evaluate the degree to which Muisca chiefs drew on these ideas and directly controlled the internal organization of settlement space at the Muisca archaeological site of Suta, in the Valley of Leyva, Colombia. To these ends, we measure the spatial distances between houses, continuity in house location, and the construction of public, non-residential spaces within a single settlement during the Early Muisca Period (1000–1200 AD) and the Late Muisca Period (1200–1600 AD). This analysis of Muisca residential and whole settlement patterns is based on the complete mapping of Suta. Topographic mapping of the 33-ha study area and 1225 systematic shovel test probes was used to identify residential locations, settlement boundaries, and unoccupied areas within the settlement.

These analyses of indigenous vocabulary, archaeological settlement patterns, and models of complex society respond to recent theoretical debates on the house, an anthropological concept first proposed by Levi-Strauss and subsequently reconceptualized by social anthropologists working in Southeast Asia and South America (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995) that recognized the primacy of native categories over problematic kinship classifications (e.g., Kuper, 1988, 1993).¹ This work, while recognizing an intellectual debt to Levi-Strauss's notions of the house, departs from recent analyses of house societies and debates about the utility of native concepts of house for anthropological analyses of generalized phenomena (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Helms, 1998; Joyce and Gillespie, 2000). We argue that native concepts of house, such as *gue*, are effective and interesting units of analyses for challenging us to understand societies in their own terms and for directly confronting the analytic limitations that stem from our own disciplinary divisions. Moreover, understanding the multiple meanings of the Muisca house provides a culturally specific context for evaluating Muisca leadership strategies.

Political authority in Muisca complex societies

The archaeological history of the eastern highland savannah of Colombia (Fig. 1) is broadly divided into 6 time periods: Paleoindian (10,450 BC–2050 BC), Archaic (2050 BC–400 BC), Herrera or Formative (400 BC–1000 AD), Early Muisca (1000 AD–1200 AD), Late Muisca (1200 AD–1538 AD), and Colonial (1538 AD–

1820 AD).² The first signs of political inequality and the formation of chiefdoms dates to the Early Muisca period (1000 AD–1200 AD), beginning in the 11th century AD, and is characterized as a period of social and political competition between chiefs of small, independent settlements. Several different lines of archaeological evidence support this interpretation: (1) the introduction of a diversity of decorated serving vessels, some associated with corn beer, that are interpreted as evidence of feasting (Boada, 1998; Kruschek, 2003; Langebaek, 2001); (2) the regional proliferation of numerous small settlements some of which are located in easily defensible areas (Langebaek, 1995) or areas of prime agricultural land (Langebaek, 2001); (3) the beginning of mummification practices (Langebaek, 1995); and (4) the introduction of gold artifacts made for offerings and personal adornments (Langebaek, 1995, 2000).³ Based on this evidence, investigators argue that political authority was largely dependent on individual leadership skills, related to religious authority, and limited to single communities (Boada, 1998; Kruschek, 2003; Langebaek, 2000). It is only during the Late Muisca period (1200 AD–1600 AD) that investigators begin to see evidence that political authority was more centralized and organizationally complex with the formation of two-tiered regional settlement hierarchies (Langebaek, 1995, 2001). Raised field agriculture and stone monuments are also reported within the Muisca area (Broadbent, 1965, 1968, 1969), though investigators have only begun to date these features. Archaeological evidence that political authority was tied to wealth differences within Muisca populations is thus far scarce though a small degree of economic differentiation has been documented between households (Boada, 1998; Kruschek, 2003). Likewise, analyses of Early and Late Muisca period tombs associated with three different Muisca settlements indicate only a very modest scale of social differentiation and no evidence of individual wealth differences (Boada, 2000).

To what degree did Muisca chiefs control political, territorial, and economic organization? The lack of archaeological evidence of wealth differences and regionally integrated territories contrasts with historic sources

¹ See Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) and Gillespie (2000) for critical reviews of Levi-Strauss's writings on houses and house societies.

² See Cárdenas (2002); Langebaek (1992b, pp. 22–37), Botiva (1989) for discussions of Paleoindian and Archaic chronologies. The Herrera period, and its possible internal chronological divisions are most recently summarized by Langebaek (1995, 2001) and Kruschek (2003). Likewise, Early and Late Muisca chronologies are discussed in Langebaek (2001). The Colonial Period, and its chronological subdivisions, are presented by Therrien et al. (2002).

³ Langebaek cites the five earliest dates for gold artifacts in the Muisca area as falling within the end of the Herrera period, between 520 and 960 AD (Langebaek, 2000, p. 30), which is more generally suggestive of status differences related to gold offerings during the end of the Herrera period.

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