



# Insult to veneration: The evolution of prehistoric intrusiveness within the Casma Valley of Peru

Shelia Pozorski\*, Thomas Pozorski

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, 1201 West University Drive, Edinburg, TX 78539, United States



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## ABSTRACT

Excavation data from monumental architecture at the site of Sechín Alto near the Peruvian coast that span more than 20 centuries are used here to explore archaeological intrusiveness, the post-primary reuse of archaeological sites, from a diachronic perspective. Three substantial cultural intrusions have been documented, and they are examined here as a means to study the processes involved as the function of the monumental architecture changes, as the associated social memory evolves, and as intentionality or agency changes. Initially, strong negative social memory resulted in a “branding” of the monument by its rivals followed by an era of desecration, destruction, and rebuilding by a hostile local population that changed the monument’s function. The final intrusive episode documents changes in monument function and social memory as the monument came to be viewed as a sacred space for burial and a vantage point overlooking the valley floor.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of archaeological intrusiveness is explored here using specific examples of this phenomenon from the Casma Valley of Peru and by demonstrating how these examples contribute to a better understanding of the role of archaeological intrusiveness in the process of cultural development. Prehistoric intrusiveness can be traced within the Casma Valley of Peru across a span of several centuries from about 1400 BCE to 1000 CE by examining local responses following the decline of the Sechín Alto Polity which unified the valley from 1800 to 1400 BCE. Precisely because of its prominent position within the polity and upon the local landscape, the principal mound at Sechín Alto site – the administrative center of the polity – was the target of three successive acts of intrusiveness once the polity’s power waned. These responses began very early in the archaeological record at about 1400 BCE, before the end of the Initial Period (2000–1000 BCE); and they continued into the late Middle Horizon (800–1000 CE) through Late Intermediate Period (1000–1470 CE). The first intruders were people of the Las Haldas Polity who had coexisted with the Sechín Alto Polity for centuries with surprisingly little interaction. Reacting to the power vacuum created by the decline of the Sechín Alto Polity in the late Initial Period (about 1400 BCE), the Las Haldas Polity aggressively expanded from its capital at the coastal site of Las Haldas into the Casma Valley by intruding upon several Sechín Alto Polity sites (Pozorski and Pozorski, 2006). During the subsequent Early Horizon (1000–200 BCE) the legacy of the Sechín Alto Polity persisted as a collective memory sufficiently strong to

provoke the local population to desecrate remains of polity iconography and to deliberately reorient and obscure its architecture by constructing a sizeable village upon the main mound summit. A millennium passed before the Sechín Alto main mound saw a new cultural presence, and the resultant late Middle Horizon (800–1000 CE)-Late Intermediate Period (1000–1470 CE) burials and architecture reflect both diminished social memory and an attitude change from negative to positive.

The term “intrusiveness” refers to the reuse of a site through human resettlement, reconstruction, or other interaction with architecture subsequent to its original or primary construction. The result of such intrusions is a multicomponent site that gives us the time depth to explore the *process* of intrusiveness as changes in site function give rise to changes in social meaning which in turn result in changes in social memory. A key variable in the study of intrusiveness is agency—both the human intentionality or goals behind the intrusions and the nonhuman agency intrinsic to sites and their social memory that elicits human responses.

Archaeological data from the Casma Valley provide tangible diachronic evidence of changing site function, evolving social memory, and changing human and nonhuman agency. These hard data are critical to a general understanding of culture change and the process of intrusiveness. By viewing early Casma Valley prehistory through the perspective of intrusiveness, we are also able to better understand both the Sechín Alto Polity as a target of intrusions and subsequent local cultural developments as intruders because we have evidence of their reactions and relationships to each other. More generally, these data

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [shelia.pozorski@utrgv.edu](mailto:shelia.pozorski@utrgv.edu) (S. Pozorski), [thomas.pozorski@utrgv.edu](mailto:thomas.pozorski@utrgv.edu) (T. Pozorski).

also both inform and support the growing body of methodology and theory that emphasizes concepts of social meaning, social memory, intrusiveness, and human and nonhuman agency as archaeological phenomena that are of interest to scholars of complex society worldwide.

## 2. The archaeology of intrusiveness

Concepts related to intrusiveness can be traced to the latter half of the 19th century and into the first half of the 20th century when the writings of archaeologists including Montelius (1899), Ratzel (1896–1898 cited in Trigger, 1989), and Childe (1939) resulted in the theoretical framework that came to be known as diffusionism as a means to explain culture change. Their definition of archaeological cultures which in turn were linked with the actions of groups of people set the stage for the recognition of specific cultural intrusions. Building on these early beginnings, ideas about culture change and cultural intrusions were modified and amplified as more archaeological data became available. Nevertheless, the student new to archaeology would find little guidance about appropriate methodologies to approach the phenomenon of intrusiveness despite its frequent occurrence in the field. General texts about field methods briefly mention intrusive burials as accidental or deliberate cultural disruptions of stratigraphy (Renfrew and Bahn, 2016: 55; Sharer and Ashmore, 1987: 242) and describe the impact of successive human behaviors on the archaeological record in their discussion of cultural transformations (Fagan 2009: 67; Fagan and De Corse, 2005: 80). Schiffer offers a more detailed treatment of intrusiveness in his work on formational processes where he discusses site maintenance processes, site abandonment, and site reoccupation (Schiffer, 1987). Shorter works such as Hansen et al. (2008), which distinguishes between site reuse and reoccupation, and Canuto and Andrews (2008), which offers a typology for post-abandonment behavior, discuss terminology and concepts related to intrusiveness in greater detail.

Broader theoretical treatments of social memory (Borić, 2010a; Starzmann and Roby, 2016; Van Dyke and Alcock, 2003) and the archaeology of the past in the past (Stanton and Magnoni, 2008a) explore archaeological evidence of repeated site occupations, the underlying motivation for change, and social memory as a negotiated process, all of which are directly related to archaeological intrusiveness. The dearth of references to intrusiveness in volumes on field methods is countered by assertions within theoretical volumes that post-primary site data can address critical research issues and should receive more attention from archaeologists (Stanton and Magnoni, 2008b; Canuto and Andrews, 2008). Clearly, the discipline of archaeology needs to expand the body of methodology and theory that deals more explicitly with the concept and manifestations of intrusiveness. Specific examples of archaeological intrusions that targeted the Initial Period (2000–1000 BCE) Sechín Alto Polity within the Casma Valley of coastal Peru are presented here as a means to demonstrate the impact of intrusiveness and the changing social memory it reflects, illustrate methodological approaches, and inform theory building.

The Sechín Alto Polity itself clearly intruded upon the natural landscape of the Casma Valley system creating a built environment of immense mound-dominated settlements along with the canals, agricultural fields, and roads that supported them. Sechín Alto site, the likely administrative center of the polity, was especially aggressive in its intrusiveness. Within the Sechín branch of the Casma River system its principal mound and accompanying smaller mounds and plazas occupy some 2 sq km of valuable arable land. The main mound alone measures 250 by 350 m, an area equal to 15 football fields, and it still stands 35 m tall. This structure was the largest mound construction in the New World at that time and, it symbolized the power and importance of the Sechín Alto Polity at its apogee (Pozorski and Pozorski, 2002, 2011a, 2005; T. Pozorski and S. Pozorski, 2012). Such constructed landscapes are known to significantly impact the local

population and provoke memories (Alcock, 2002; Knapp and Ashmore, 1999; Rosenswig, 2012; Stanton and Margoni, 2008b). Furthermore, because of the hyperarid climate of coastal Peru, monumental architecture is currently clearly visible at many very early sites; and this phenomenon of exceptional preservation likely contributed to the persistence of social memories of these sites and their grandeur in the manner described by Van Dyke (2003) and Meskell (2003). Such monuments initially reflected conscious social memory building by their makers; however, these memories changed as monuments were continuously reinterpreted over the course of centuries (Crawford, 2007; Van Dyke, 2009). At Sechín Alto mound, the degrees of historical mentality or historicism described by Canuto and Andrews (2008) became a process through which early hostile responses gave way to later veneration and, finally, indifference as local social memory weakened. Though very different in magnitude and manner of expression, these distinct manifestations of intrusiveness serve as archaeological examples of the phenomenon Canuto and Andrews describe as “reuse,” especially of what they describe as “banished” or abandoned areas (Canuto and Andrews, 2008) and what Hanson et al. describe as “re-occupation” (Hansen et al., 2008).

## 3. Sechín Alto site and polity

To set the stage for this description of prehistoric intrusiveness within the Casma Valley, we must first briefly examine the Sechín Alto Polity—the target of a series of intruders. This polity was centered within the northern, Sechín branch, of the Casma Valley river system (Fig. 1); and its influence extended to the nearby coastal zone and likely north into the Nepeña Valley. During the Initial Period when most Peruvian coastal valleys contained large mound-dominated sites located well inland at optimum locations for the irrigation agriculture that supported emerging polities, the Sechín Alto Polity stood out because of the sheer size of its public constructions and clear evidence of social control (Pozorski and Pozorski, 2011b, 2016; T. Pozorski and S. Pozorski, 2012).

Major Sechín Alto Polity sites include Sechín Alto (Fig. 2), Sechín Bajo, Taukachi-Konkán, and Cerro Sechín that are grouped into the ten-square-kilometer Sechín Alto Complex based on their coincident orientations, similar and clearly-planned layouts, shared architectural elements, similar artifacts—especially ceramics (Fig. 3a), and overlapping radiocarbon dates. Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke, the other major site of the Sechín Alto Polity, dominates the southern, Casma, branch of the local river system (Fig. 1); and it is included within the polity based on similarities in site layout, architectural details, artifacts, and radiocarbon dates. Three coastal satellite communities, Bahía Seca, Tortugas, and Huaynuná (Fig. 1) also formed a vital part of the polity by supplying marine protein in return for inland agricultural products (Pozorski and Pozorski, 1987: 82, 1992, 2008).

At each major site, one or more symmetrical central mounds establish the site axis as an orientation followed by rows of administrative structures and other formal, high-status architecture (Pozorski, 1987: 18–23; Pozorski and Pozorski, 1987: 82, 1992, 1994a). Lower-status residential architecture is irregular, often agglutinated, and haphazard in its orientation. Within the Sechín Alto Polity, major mounds at different sites had different functions—as temples, palaces, warehouses, and as administrative centers; and this complementarity of function among sites was probably a key factor in the success of the polity (Pozorski and Pozorski, 1999, 2000).

The main Sechín Alto site mound, which was likely the polity's administrative center, dwarfs all other polity mounds and housed a variety of functions (Fig. 2). Zones near the mound front were audience areas (Fig. 2J), and administrative structures (Fig. 2E) were present just east of the conical adobe core (Fig. 2B), a central area made of cone-shaped mud bricks. The conical adobe core was raised well above the surrounding mound surface when it was first constructed, and it supported approximately 90 columns adorned with polychrome friezes on

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