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The political economic and culinary roles of marine fish in southern Peru from the Middle Horizon (A.D. 600) through Spanish colonial periods

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ABSTRACT

In the Central Andes fish and other marine products were often used to support the political economy of complex social groups, particularly those dating to the later prehispanic time periods. Dried fish could be preserved for shipment to other geographic regions to serve as a form of staple finance. Fish were also an important symbol of status, particularly at sites further from the ocean and at high elevations where the ability to acquire marine fish indicated control over exchange networks. In order to determine if marine fishing and the preservation of fish as a commodity was a component of the political economy of ancient Central Andean cultures of far southern Peru, I examine the zooarcheological record of marine fishes at nine prehispanic and four Spanish colonial sites from the Osmore River drainage. As shown in this analysis, there are no coastal sites in far southern Peru with unequivocal evidence of fish processing to dry fish for long-term storage or inland transport as an everyday commodity to support the political economy of local cultures. Evidence for small-scale drying on the coast for presumed local consumption is evident during later prehispanic periods. During the Spanish colonial period, small quantities of fish were shipped to inland settings; however, the taxa differ slightly from the fish used during the prehispanic periods. Although there is no evidence for a coordinated use of fish to support the political economic undertakings of the populations in the Osmore Basin, the enduring trade and exchange in marine fishes through time and over large interior distances indicates the significant social roles that marine foods played, primarily for culinary and status purposes.

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1. Introduction

The Pacific Ocean littoral of the Central Andes is one of the most bountiful maritime habitats in the world. The trade and exchange of marine fish and coastal resources were often important components of ancient Andean political economy. If dried and preserved, fish could be stored for shipment to interior settlements as a form of staple finance (see Marcus et al., 1999; Sandweiss, 1992). Fish were also prized for culinary purposes not related to economic roles. In addition to being able to feed many people with marine foodstuffs, the ability to acquire fresh fish and shellfish were markers of high status. At their mountain capital of Cuzco the Inca dined on fresh fish from the south coast of Peru (Garcilaso, 1966). Following the Spanish conquest, many European colonists favored living at lower elevations (Orlove, 1993). For those who resided on the coast, many adopted fishing as an occupation. Early historical fishing communities are shown in several colonial images by Guaman Poma (1615/1616) in his illustrated letter to the king of Spain. Fishing during the colonial period was practiced not only because it was lucrative, but also because fish satisfied Catholic proscriptions against meat consumption on Fridays. The scale and role

of fish as either a political economic commodity or as a status good varies significantly through Andean space and time.

I examine the zooarcheological record of marine fish from nine prehispanic sites and four colonial sites in the Osmore River Valley of far southern Peru (Fig. 1; Table 1) to determine whether fish were mass-produced economic commodities, culinary items that added dietary variety, or status items with restricted distribution. These sites date to the Middle Horizon (~A.D. 600–1100), the Late Horizon (~A.D. 1400–1532), and the colonial period (post-1532). The sites range in elevation from the coast to the sierra (~2500 m above sea level, masl). Coastal sites with abundant fish remains are associated with the Late Horizon and Inca period sites. A variety of marine fishes occur at inland sites associated with the Middle Horizon expansion of the imperial Wari and Tiwanaku states to the region as well as at inland Spanish colonial settlements. These interior settings are up to 80 km from the Pacific shoreline. In addition to the zooarcheological evidence, I examine the spatial contexts associated with fish preservation to determine if fish production was used to support political economic goals, for culinary roles, for status roles, or for a combination of uses.

As shown in this analysis, none of the coastal sites examined have unequivocal evidence of drying fish for long-term storage or inland transport as a commodity; however, evidence for small-scale drying for presumed local consumption is evident during later prehispanic

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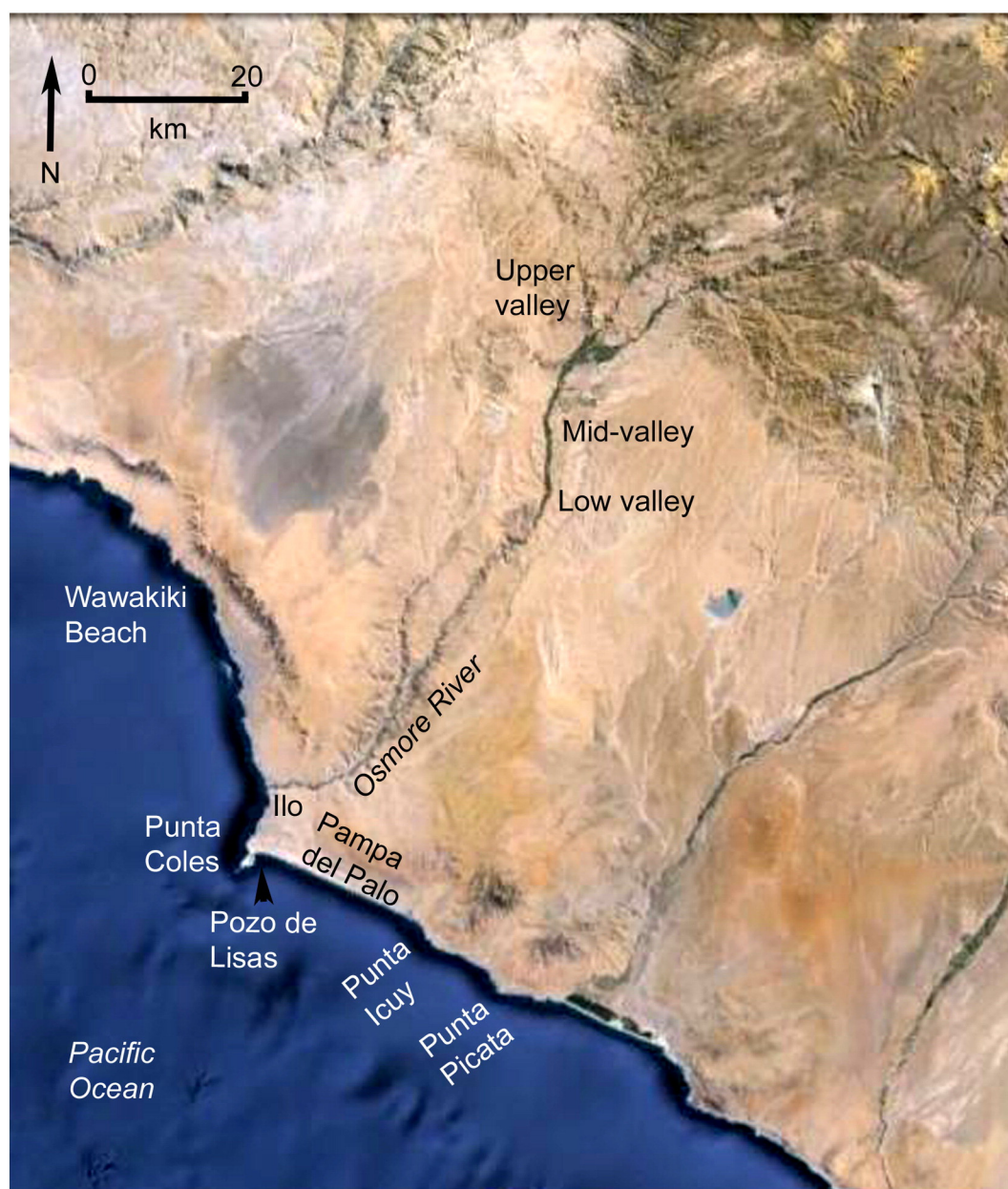


Fig. 1. The Osmore coastal plain and valley.

periods. During the Spanish colonial period, fish continued to be transported to inland settings; although the taxa changed. These findings are in contrast to some areas of the Central Andean coast where

Inca sites associated with industrial-scale fish drying and transport are found (see Marcus et al., 1999; Sandweiss, 1992). Although I conclude there is no evidence for a coordinated use of fish to support the political

Table 1
Site locations and time periods.

Site	Location	Time period	Distance (km) from coast
Punta Picata	Coastal	Late Horizon/Inca	Littoral
Tacahuay Tambo	Coastal	Late Horizon/Inca	3
Rio Muerto	Low valley	Middle Horizon/Tiwanaku	45
Omo Domestic	Middle valley	Middle Horizon/Tiwanaku	55
Omo Temple	Middle valley	Middle Horizon/Tiwanaku	55
Chen Chen	Middle valley	Middle Horizon/Tiwanaku	66
Cerro Baul	Upper valley	Middle Horizon/Wari	75
Chincha	Low valley	Spanish Colonial	45
Locumbilla	Middle valley	Spanish Colonial	57
Yahuay	Middle valley	Spanish Colonial	61
Torata Alta	Upper valley	Spanish Colonial	80

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