

REPORT

A Deposit of Silver *Aquillas* from the Site of Purun Llacta de Soloco, Amazonas, Peru

James M. Crandall¹ and Lorenzo Risco Patiño²

¹Department of Anthropology, California State University, Sacramento, CA, USA; and ²Universität Bonn Institut für Archäologie und Kulturanthropologie, Bonn, Germany

Corresponding author: James M. Crandall; Email: james.crandall@csus.edu

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Abstract

This report examines the deposit of a sixteenth-century cache of silver *aquillas* within a Chachapoya household at the site of Purun Llacta de Soloco. The report examines their context and contents. These findings have implications for a larger examination of social value in Andean societies and the specialized treatment and use of ritual objects during the tumultuous colonial period.

Resumen

Este informe presenta un entierro ritual de *aquillas* del siglo dieciséis, colocado debajo del piso de una vivienda Chachapoya del sitio de Purun Llacta de Soloco. El informe examina el contexto y el contenido de las *aquillas* encontradas en el sitio. Estos hallazgos tienen implicaciones para un análisis más amplio de su valor social en las sociedades andinas, en relación con el tratamiento especializado y el uso de objetos rituales durante el tumultuoso periodo colonial.

Keywords: *aquilla*; *quero*; ritual deposit; Andes; Chachapoyas; colonial archaeology

Palabras clave: *aquilla*; *quero*; entierro ritual; Andes; Chachapoyas; arqueología colonial

One of the primary goals of Proyecto Purun Llacta de Soloco was to identify the chronological development of Chachapoya communities and to understand the orientation of households during three periods of its colonial history. This first period relates to the poorly understood ethnogenesis of nucleated communities along the Utcubamba River, which expanded between the early eleventh and the fifteenth centuries. The second period was during the Inka conquest of the mid-fifteenth century. The third period involves the Spanish conquest of the region after AD 1536. The project mapped the site of Purun Llacta de Soloco and excavated units in 12 of the site's 264 stone structures (Figure 1). One of these units uncovered a cache of two intricately engraved silver *aquillas*.

Aquillas are ceremonial drinking cups from the Andes. These vessels served an important place in the ritual and political economy of the Andes before, during, and after the expansion of the Inka state. Cummins (2002:106–107) observes that like their wooden and ceramic counterparts *queros*, *aquillas* were used to drink *aqha* (corn beer) and were significant symbols for legitimizing Inka sovereignty. These vessels were produced as complimentary pairs with consideration toward their owner's social status in relation to the materials used in their production (Cummins 2002:107). However, *aquillas* have rarely been found in archaeological contexts. The intentional internment of a pair of these vessels in a colonial period household indicates that they are a key part of understanding changing notions of value at the intersection of the Amazon and the Andes during the early Spanish colonial period.

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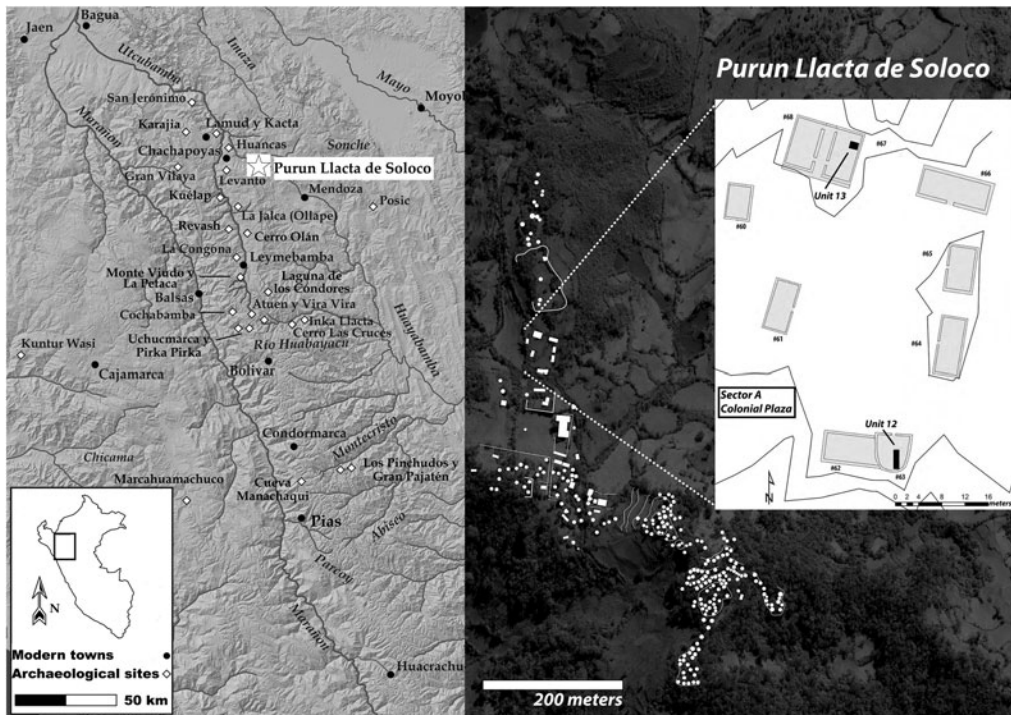


Figure 1. Maps of Chachapoya sites and Purun Llacta de Soloco (maps by James M. Crandall).

Aquillas and Queros in the Andes

The practice of producing ritual cups for politicized exchange existed as a shared value across many Andean societies (Cummins 2002). These objects became a fundamental part of political incorporation by which the Inka state reified its authority over non-Inka groups.

Few *aquillas* have been recovered from documented contexts. Seven pairs were encountered on the shipwreck of the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* by treasure hunters, damaged silver “tumblers” were found in a Late Horizon Ica tomb documented by Uhle (Menzel 1976:225), an undecorated silver pair was excavated in a tomb at Ollantaytambo (Llanos 1936:142, Plate V), and four *aquillas* were excavated at Yuraq Rumi Ñusta by Alvino Nevada (Agencia Andina 2023). *Aquillas* are part of a continuum of vessels that were produced in similar forms with different materials. Whereas *queros* were made of wood and ceramic, and *aquillas* were made of gold and silver (Cummins 2002:29).

While a comparative collection of *aquillas* cannot be examined for their use in social practice, we can look to *queros* to better understand the use of *aquillas* and their ritual significance by considering their depositional practices. A recent overview by Zori (2022) argues that *queros* should be considered inalienable objects, or materials that retain their association with individuals and kin groups in perpetuity. Zori (2022:67–68) observes that *queros* are often found within mortuary contexts and involve ritualized practices in socially significant places.

These findings indicate that *queros* and *aquillas* were not only used in prescribed social activities but also at the end of their social lives; they were sometimes ritually deposited within these spaces. For instance, a cache containing wooden *queros* was found buried within a structure facing a plaza at Huanuco Pampa, which led Morris and colleagues (2011:131–137) to suggest it could have been a special-use structure. Similarly, a late period ceramic Tiwanaku *quero* was found deposited in front of a large structure in the Muyumarca sector at Sacsayhuaman (Valcárcel 1935:164–166). Wooden and ceramic *queros* were found in elite residences at Omo 12, lending significance to their place as pan-Andean status markers (Goldstein 2005:204–206). Finally, the deliberate burial of Inka period

queros at San Juan de Pariachi—sealed in mud within a floor before a new floor was placed above (Villacorta cited in Zori 2022:68–69)—mirrors the depositional context of the Purun Llacta de Soloco *aquillas*.

The Site of Purun Llacta de Soloco and the Context of the *Aquillas*

Purun Llacta de Soloco is one of the largest communities associated with Chachapoya culture.¹ Current documentation indicates that the site likely had a population of between 1,206 and 1,547 people during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries AD and was part of a group of communities within 12 km² connected by a road system. This greater area likely maintained a population of 7,000–10,000 persons (Crandall 2018:122–125). Purun Llacta was occupied contemporaneously with the regional center of Kuelap (which lies 40 km to the southwest by foot). Similarities in ceramics and burial traditions have been documented between the two sites (Crandall 2018).

Purun Llacta went through radical social transformations throughout its history. The establishment of a sedentary community at the apex of Cerro Lic Lic occurred between 32 BC and AD 769.² This coincides with a regional intensification of agricultural production and periodic reforestation (Matthews-Bird et al. 2017:1716–1717). Large-scale construction of stone structures occurred at the site between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries AD. Expansion of household construction continued during the initial Inka occupation of the site, with the construction of civic spaces such as public plazas, a *tambo*, and several small *qolqa*. During this period, much of the population was reported to have been forcibly removed to an Inka *mitmaqkuna* around Quito by Rumiñahui, a “captain” of Atahualpa (De los Chuquinbalquis 1749:f.3v). Spanish conquistadors arrived in AD 1536, and the Sonche valley’s Indigenous population was indentured among four encomenderos by AD 1575. By the late sixteenth century, communities around the Sonche River were suffering from a population loss of 1.41%–1.69% per year on average, and many communities disappeared by the mid-seventeenth century (Crandall 2018).

Structure 63 at Purun Llacta was built with large, worked limestone blocks to form a semicircular structure. The building faces a 22 × 36 m plaza that was constructed during the Spanish colonial period. A 3 × 1 m unit was placed slightly east of the central axis of the structure against the building’s southern wall. Excavation of the final occupation surface recovered several artifacts including chert flake fragments, several diagnostic ceramics including *olla*, *cántaro*, and bowl rim sherds, with paste, temper, and design like those found in Late Horizon and early Spanish colonial period contexts at Purun Llacta. The removal of this upper level revealed an earlier use surface below.

The earlier use surface of the structure was defined by a change in color and the presence of several cut stones embedded into its surface. The *aquillas* were discovered during the removal of Level 2 with a change in soil density. A 30 cm circular area contained the same soil (color) as Level 2 but with a much looser texture. The *aquillas* had been deposited, one inside the other, within this cut through Level 2 and placed on the surface of the bedrock below (Figure 2). The removal of level 2 uncovered redware ceramics that are found in Late Horizon and early Spanish colonial contexts at the site.

The Purun Llacta de Soloco *Aquillas*

Aquilla 1 had developed several small cracks around the rim due to its compressed position, having been placed within Aquilla 2 during their deposition. Aquilla 1 measures 112 mm tall from base to rim, is 8 mm thick, and weighs 152.8 g. Aquilla 2 measures 109 mm, sits at a slight angle (possibly due to heating malformation at the base), measures 8 mm thick, and weighs 154 g. The *aquillas* were produced as a matching pair following techniques observed in other early colonial silver objects (Carcedo De Mufarech and Vetter Parodi 2002). Silversmiths hammered a flat circular sheet of silver alloy and then manipulated the form around a preformed mold. Design details were incised using chisels and burins. The slight variation in the two surfaces of Aquilla 1 shows how designs were engraved on the exterior covering earlier embossing on the interior (Figure 3).

Crandall (2016) examined seven silver *aquillas* found on the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* that sunk off the coast of Florida in AD 1622. The Purun Llacta *aquillas* share several similarities to the Atocha *aquillas*: their mode of production with embossing along a preformed mold, the use of engraving to



Figure 2. Primary context of the *aquillas* (photo by James M. Crandall).



Figure 3. Engraving on exterior (*left*) and interior (*right image reversed*) of Aquilla 1 (photographs by James M. Crandall).

highlight designs, the use of a horizontal band and vertical divisions to segregate motifs, and the small lip along the rim. In a conservation report of the Purun Llacta *aquillas* prepared by Seclén Fernández (2015), a Kupfer strip test indicated a mild regent reaction, suggesting they contained low amounts of copper. This is not surprising as other *aquillas* made during the same period were made of a similar

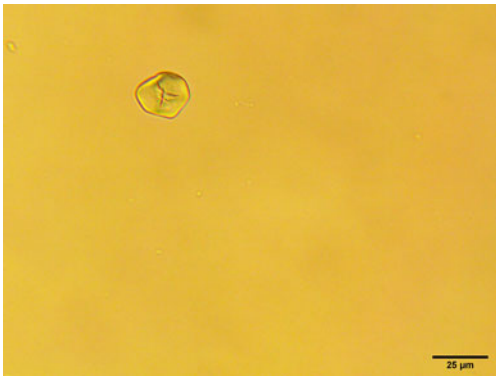


Figure 4. *Zea mays* starch grains from the interior of Aquilla 1 (photo by Justin Wisely).

silver/copper/tin ratio as coins produced by the Spanish mint (Crandall 2016). Several of the *aquillas* from the Atocha were identified as having been produced in Potosi and contained “maker’s marks.” However, the Purun Llacta *aquillas* do not contain signifiers of their production origin.

The vessel interiors contained minimal cultural remains. Macrobotanicals consisted of small unidentified wood fragments. The gap between vessels 1 and 2 was clean of debris. A single *cántaro* rim fragment was recovered of a type found in Late Horizon and early Spanish colonial contexts at Purun Llacta and was likely part of the fill from where the vessels were buried. Starch grain samples from the inside of Aquilla 1 were recovered using a toothbrush to rub the interior grooves of the vessel with distilled water. *Zea mays* starch grains were photographed from the collected samples (Figure 4), suggesting that the vessels were probably used for the consumption of *aqha*.

The designs engraved into the *aquillas* reflect a narrative procession (Figures 5 and 6) like recent scholarship on Inka and early colonial portable objects which has argued that some vessels express representational narratives (Martínez and Martínez 2013; Ziolkowski and Siemianowska 2021:60–63). The forward-facing figures on the Purun Llacta *aquillas* mirror the procession presented on a carved stone bowl in the collection of the British Museum. This object displays a procession of male and female figures holding an array of objects such as multiple *chiktana* (axes) flanking a central solar disc. McEwan (2009:92–93) suggests that this procession mimics ritualized Andean ceremonies associated with agricultural production.

In the scenes depicted on each of the Purun Llacta vessels, the representations are similar but not identical. Alternating men and women are depicted in Inka/Spanish colonial period dress (*unku* and *anaku*). Headwear on the men may be representative of colonial brimmed hats. However, the presence of fringes may indicate that they are *pillu* (circlets, or wool hats) worn from Ecuador to Bolivia (Rowe 2011:88–94). Each figure is presented holding a suite of objects that alternate between figures. These objects include a *chiktana*, what appears to be a *chuspa* (bag for coca), a *waqtana* (clod buster), and possibly a *chakitaqlla* (Andean foot plow).

The *aquillas* and deceased ancestors at Purun Llacta were treated with the same care. Excavations of burials indicate they were incorporated below household floors before architectural renovations

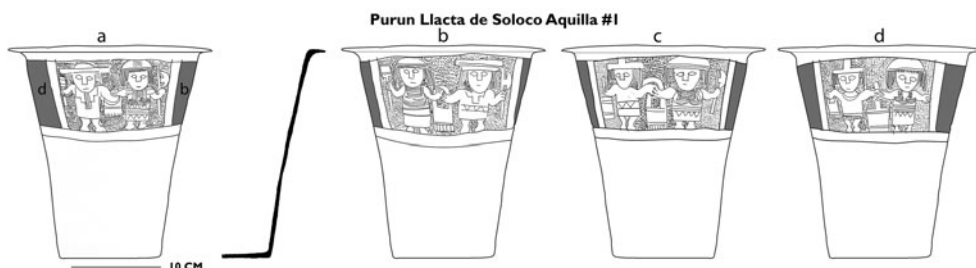


Figure 5. View of Aquilla 1 (drawing by James M. Crandall).



Figure 6. View of Aquilla 2 (drawing by James M. Crandall).

(Crandall 2018). The presence of these objects elicits agricultural themes surrounding Inka and colonial period ceremonies. The use of the *aquillas* tied individuals at Purun Llacta together in reciprocal relationships and their offering within the household suggests that notions of their value were maintained into the sixteenth century. This value was expressed despite the intensification of obligations to the viceregal state while the community suffered 100 years of population loss. In a time of social disruption, the deliberate burial of the *aquillas* by their owner solidified their inalienable relations to the house and those who lived within.

Conclusions

The deposition of *aquillas* at Purun Llacta mirrors the ritual deposition of *queros* found elsewhere. They were placed in a building facing a colonial plaza, likely dating between AD 1536 and 1580. Their incorporation mimics mortuary deposits in households at Purun Llacta. There, individuals were mummified, tightly wrapped in textiles, placed in *chullpas*, and later reinterred below household floors when construction modifications occurred within households. The *aquillas* were treated in a similar fashion and were incorporated into a household that was maintained until the community was forcibly resettled. The presence of these objects demonstrates a continuity of connections that entangled an Indigenous highland Amazonian community to the religious, social, and political practices of Andean reciprocity during the tumultuous Spanish colonial period.

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Data Availability Statement. Data is published in reports submitted to the Peruvian Ministerio de Cultura. Artifacts excavated by Proyecto Purun Llacta de Soloco are in possession of the Dirección Desconcentrada de Cultura de Amazonas.

Competing Interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. Purun Llacta was likely originally called Timal (Crandall 2018:97–99). Residents of Timal refer to themselves in legal documents as “naturales de Los Chachapoyas” in the Archivo Regional de Amazonas as early as AD 1585.
2. Carbon dates establish occupation phases at the site: Sample Bolsa 233 (D-AMS 041466) 1532 BP \pm 21, wood charcoal; Sample Bolsa 219a (D-AMS 041468) 1399 BP \pm 21, wood charcoal; Sample Bolsa 219b (D-AMS 011788) 1558 BP \pm 21, wood charcoal; Sample Bolsa 235 (D-AMS 011789) 1968 BP \pm 24, wood charcoal. An OxCal v. 4.4 modeled sequence of structure 26 indicates the earliest Inka materials occur at Purun Llacta in contexts dating from AD 1444 to 1494 (95.4% hdp): Bolsa 228 (D-AMS 011790) 450 BP \pm 27, wood charcoal; Bolsa 226 (D-AMS 041460) 427 BP \pm 20, wood charcoal.

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