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Julián Salazar.

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Household mortuary practices in a South Andean village (first millennium AD)

Julián Salazar

This report presents new data about South Andean mortuary practices and the construction of kinship relations, generated in recent field researches carried out in Early Ceramic Period (ca. 500 BC to AD 850) contexts from Tafí Valley, Northwestern Argentina.

This little valley is located in Tucumán province, between the orographic systems of Sierras de Aconquija and Cumbres Calchaquies, 2500 meters above sea level (Figure 1). It was inhabited throughout the first millennium AD by sedentary villagers whose economical practices were fundamentally maize, potato and bean agriculture and llama herding. The intensive production allowed a demographic growth, evidenced by the proliferation of village settlements, and an increase in social complexity, seen in the building of ceremonial mounds and monolithic carved stone sculptures (González y Núñez 1960, Berberían y Nielsen 1988). Nevertheless this process appears to be built on autonomous households rather than political centralization.

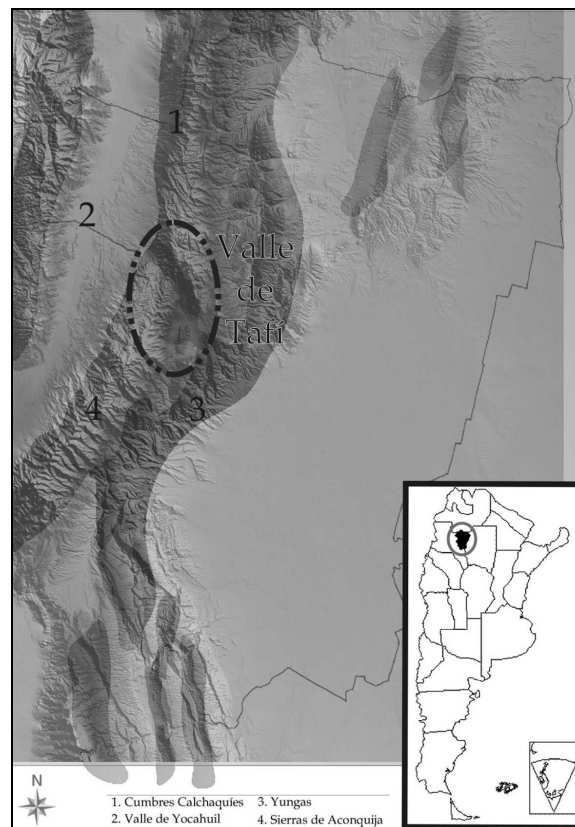


Figure 1. Map of Tucumán Province, showing the location of Tafí Valley.

Our research project aims to establish relationships between daily practices and social reproduction household strategies, and to analyze materiality active role in the construction of kinship relations and identity. Consequently we have carried out field work in residential compounds in La Bolsa 1 site.

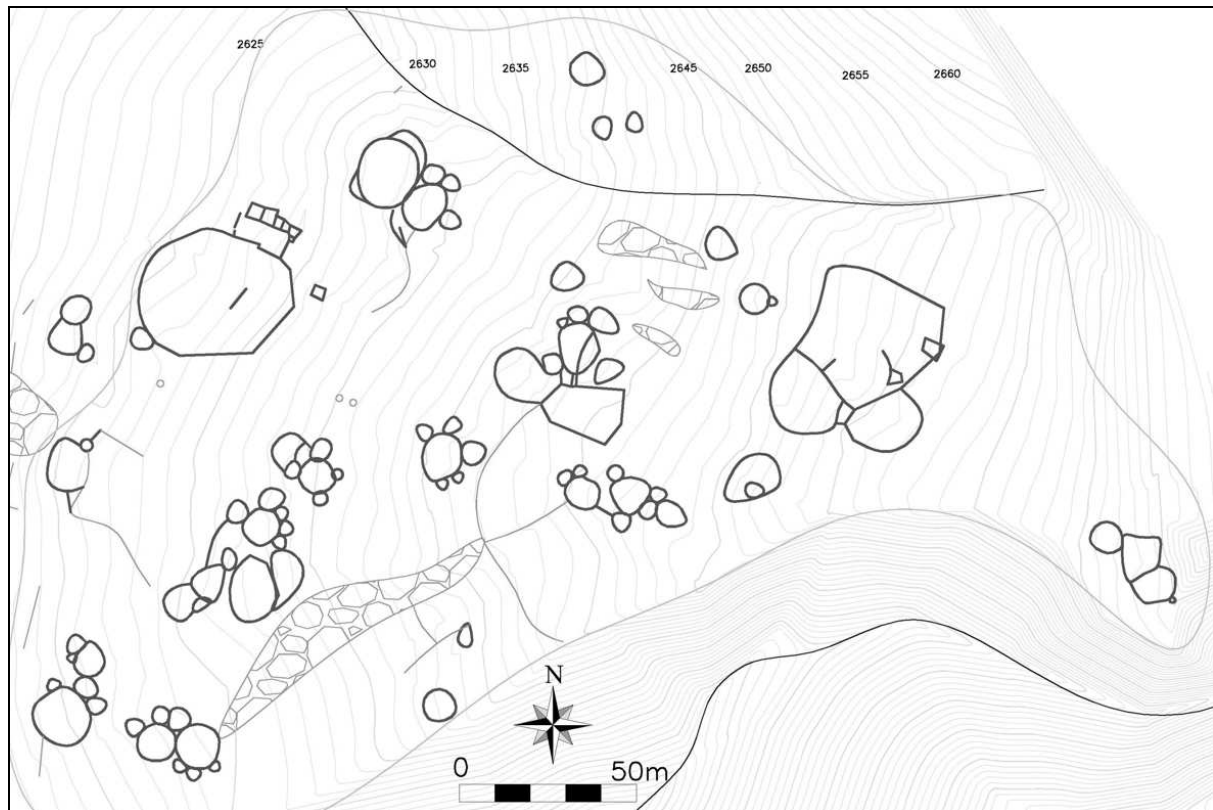


Figure 2. Map of La Bolsa 1 site, showing the distribution of archaeological remains.

Ancestor Materiality in Household Compound LB1-U14

La Bolsa 1 is a concentrated village site in the North Area of Tafi Valley, inhabited between 2100 BC and 850 AD. This settlement includes 21 household compounds and a 25 hectares complex system of agricultural structures. The site layout shows a spontaneous outgrowth rather than a strong communal planning. Household compounds are spatially segregated architectural units, of about 200 sq. meters, that hold food storage, craft production workshops and strong traces of kin identity. The dwellings include circular structures around an open patio, built with big stone masonry. (Figure 2)

We excavated two household compounds LB1-U10 and LB1-U14, and diverse outdoor contexts, in the central area of La Bolsa 1 site. In this brief paper we analyze specially the burial materiality recovered in LB1-U14 residential unit.

LB1-U14 is a residential unit with a 200 sq. meters walled surface. It is composed by a central round patio, R1, four smaller enclosures linked to it trough formal doors: R2, R3, R4 and R6, and two peripheral structures attached to R4 y R5. (Figure 3)

The spatial distribution shows a recurrent pattern, seen contemporaneously in other geographical settings near Tafi, as the Yocavil Valley and the Cajón Valley (Berberían y Nielsen 1988, Aschero y Ribotta 2007, Scattolin 2007). The dwelling plan is characterized by a centripetal organization of domestic space arranged around the central patio which is the only structure with exterior access. This central place is a circular unroofed enclosure of 80 sq. meters which monopolizes the movement within the unit, and mediates the access to the

roofed structures of the house. The residential compound was completely excavated registering all the constructive, depositional and post depositional events.

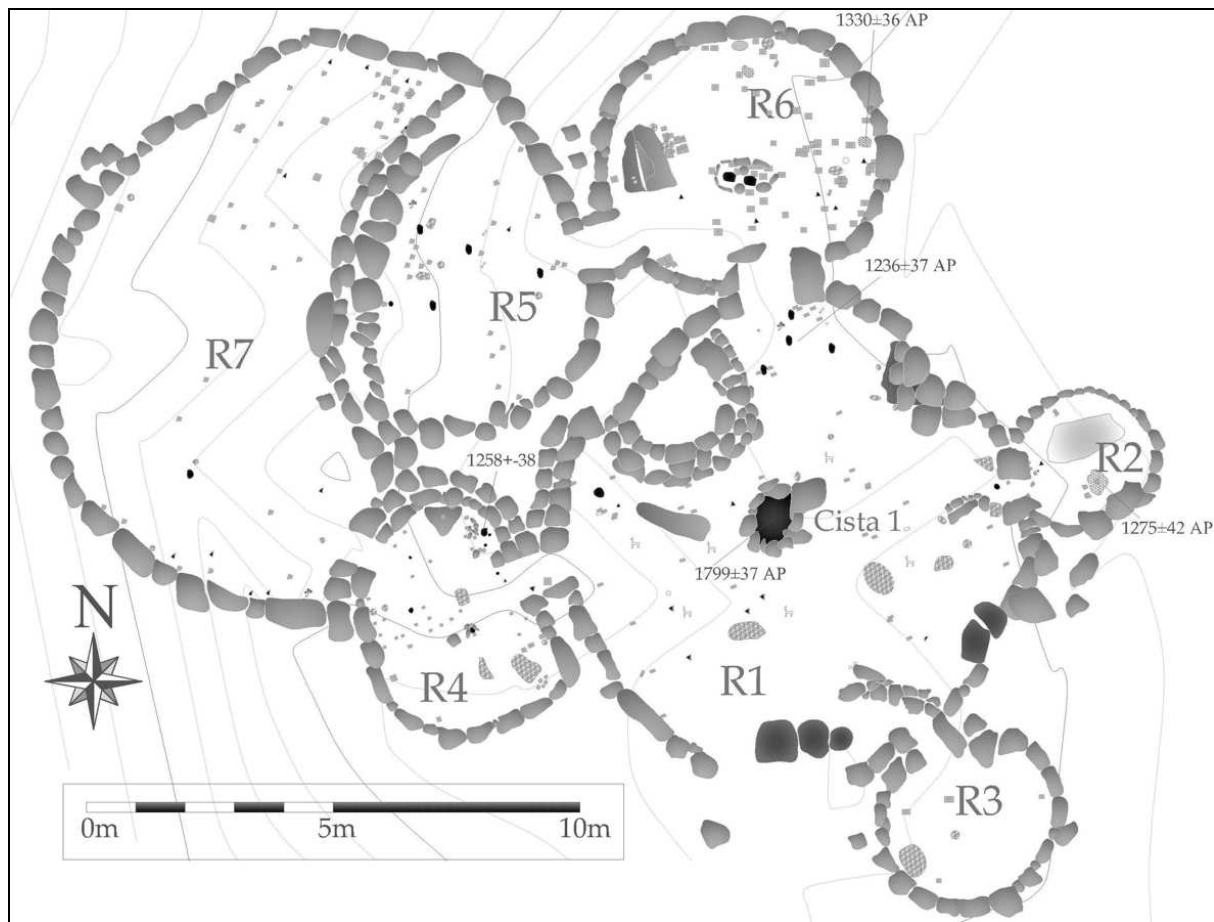


Figure 3. Map of LB1-U14 residential compound.

Architectural features, artefactual assemblage analysis, soil chemical studies and silicon phytoliths identification allowed establishing activity areas in different places of the residential compound. The occupational floors of five from the seven structures were dated from Cal AD 650 to Cal AD 850, corresponding to the last occupation of the compound before its abandonment.

The peripheral and small enclosures showed evidence of specific activities, especially food processing and cooking. In the structure R6 a few cooking vessels were broken around a central stone hearth. Maize (*Sea mays*) silicon phytoliths were identified within the soil samples taken from this area. Another practice registered was instrument storage and resting.

Diverse activities were detected in the central and bigger structure, R1: maize grinding, food storage within an especial store room and ritual deposition of ceramic animal representations and foreign pottery fragments. In the central portion of this open patio, an oval feature was located. It was an underground bell shaped stone walled chamber, with a false dome closure protruding 30 centimeters above the occupational floor. This structure, called “Cista 1”, was identified as a cist, a typical tomb type in Tafi Valley Early Ceramic Period.

At first sight, the cist could be seen as only one feature interpreted as an individual reference made to a unique household ancestor worshiped for different reasons (power, wealth or relations accumulated in his/her life). Indeed this is the regular interpretation made about other similar contexts. Nevertheless, the excavation of this burial showed that it was the result of complex depositional processes (Figure 4).

Just after the cist closure was removed, about 30 cm below the patio occupational floor, a little figurine was detected. It was an anthropomorphic stone statuette whose face shows a woman crying. This artifact presents in its lower portion a flake negative suggesting that it was intentionally broken or "killed" before the deposition.

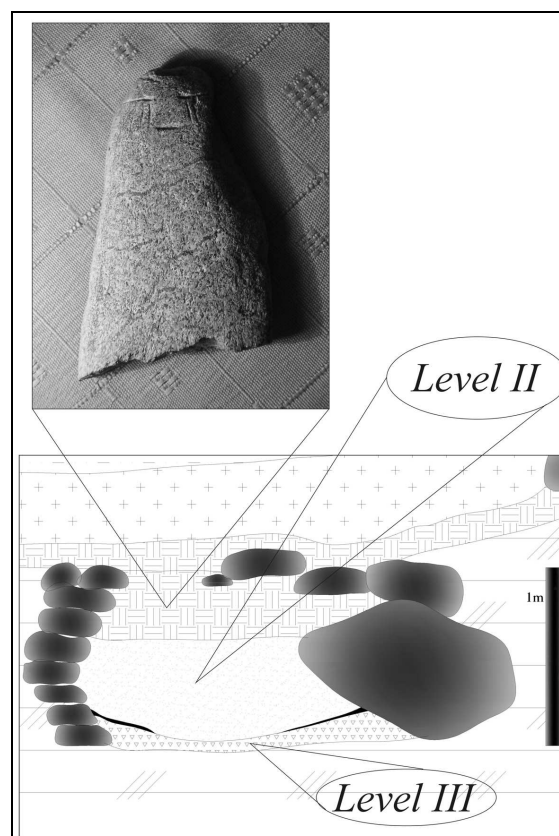


Figure 4. “Cista 1” section.

Next to the Level II base (80 centimeters below the occupational floor) we found human bone remains, in very bad conservation conditions, associated with a gray pottery bowl. Identified bone fragments were two skull pieces and twelve teeth, in the east portion of the cists. The studies of teeth roots and wear traces allowed to establish this person was an adult. Hundreds of unidentified little bone specimens were recovered from the central area of the burial. Within this sediment maize (*Sea mays*) and cucurbit (*Cucurbita* sp.) silicon phytoliths were identified, and could be interpreted as the person diet remains or as part of the dead escort. The ceramic bowl, horizontally disposed, is a fine pottery vessel without decoration, which could be typologically dated *ca.* AD 500 – AD 900.

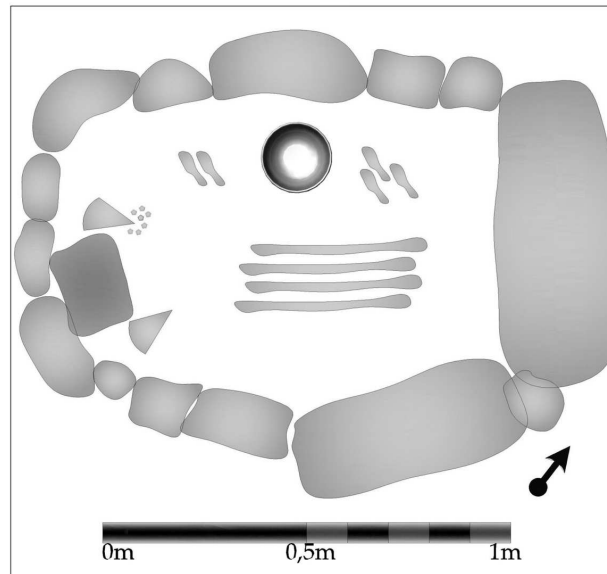


Figure 5. Level II burial remains.

Bellow this level, a thin layer of burnt clay covered all the structure. After its removal we detected a compacter stratum, Level III, where the vestiges of another burial were present. It was composed by an adult's bone remains, in very bad conservation conditions, associated with three coarse fabric vessels. The human remains were fragments of a skull and a jawbone in the west margin of the cist base, and hundreds of unidentified bone little pieces. The skeletal vestiges were accompanied by a cup (made in ordinary red clay with a rough surface finishing, which has a lip handle vertically attached, and a modeled anthropomorphic face decoration applied in the opposite side), a jar (technologically similar, with a uniform surface finishing, without decorations and a thick soot layer on the outer face), and numerous fragments of vessels with similar characteristics. None of the pottery presents complex decoration neither corresponds to what is known as "fine" craft for this period. Charred wood was recovered from this level and dated in 1799 ± 37 BP, Cal. AD130-260, being the earliest date for LB1-U14.

The materials disposition evidenced an intentional disturbing of the earliest burial event, before depositing the final. Bone remains were disposed next to the structure wall and the ceramic jar was between the jaw and the skull.

Archaeological traces registered in the burial structure of household compound LB1U14 allow proposing that this context was generated by many events of digging, opening, depositing, firing, closing and burying, forming a material palimpsest. Although palimpsests are common archaeological contexts, they are typically viewed as a handicap, an unfortunate consequence of having to rely on a material record that is incomplete.

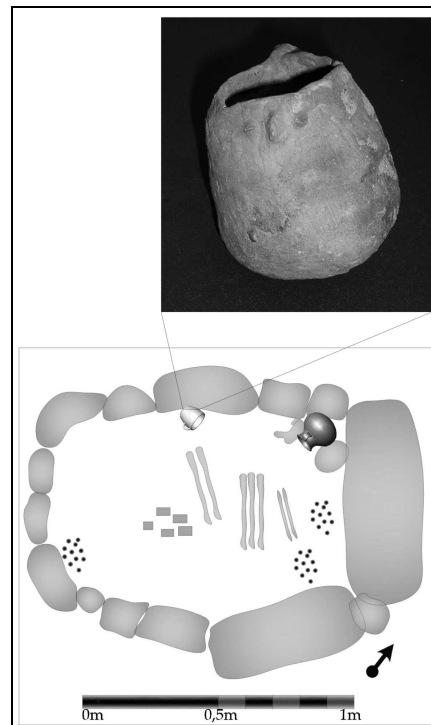


Figure 6. Level III burial remains.

Contrarily we make emphasis on the informative capacity of this particular mixture (Bailey 2007, Olivier 1999, Lucas 2005). It shows that the ancestors' corpses were not socially dead: they were continuously taken out from their tombs, showed, worshiped, fed and buried again. But even more, this mixture indicates that they were part of daily activities. The material configuration of the burial feature generated a permanent interaction with the living. It was located in the center of the house, a place of necessary path, the locus where vital practices were carried out, as maize grinding and food storage. Major part of quotidian life took place there.

Gillespie (2001) states that the construction of social persons derives from the acting within a context, as part of experience and daily practices. This includes relations between people, death and alive, groups and material objects (Brown y Walker 2008). The "mortuary palimpsest" analyzed in LB1 U14 is precisely the materialization of a particular practice that creates and strengthens kinship relations in the interaction with ancestor materiality. These practices towards death have a long duration from the first centuries AD, up to *ca.* AD 850. They were forming the relationships between house dwellers and ancestor, which gave the foundations to the household competitive group identity (Dillehay 1995).

The construction of kin groups with high internal competitive identity is a possible explanation to the formation of a complex society with the lack of political centralization, a process that was characteristic of the first millennium in the study area.

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