

## ARGENTINA

### La Bolsa 1 site, Tafí Valley, Tucumán Province

Household Mortuary Practices in a South  
Andean Village (First Millennium A.D.)

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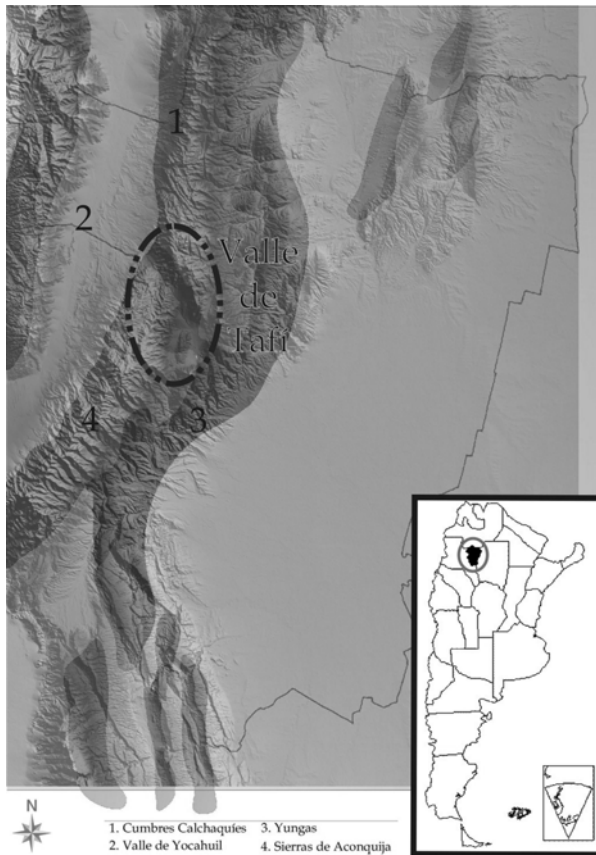


Figure 1: Map of Tucumán Province, showing the location of the Tafí Valley.

This small valley lies between the orographic systems of the Sierras de Aconquija and the Cumbres Calchaquies, and is east of the Yocahuil Valley, at an average attitude of 2500 masl (Figure 1). Throughout the first millennium A.D., its inhabitants were sedentary villagers who practiced agriculture based on maize, potatoes, and beans and who herded llamas. Intensive food production permitted demographic growth, seen in the proliferation of village settlements, and an increase in social complexity, the latter evident in ceremonial mounds and monolithic carved sculpture (Berberían and Nielsen 1988; González and Núñez 1962). Nevertheless, this population growth and increase in complexity appears to be based on autonomous households rather than on political centralization.

My research aims to establish relationships between daily practices and social reproduction strategies and household strategies, and to analyze the active role of household material assemblages in the construction of kinship relations and identity. Consequently, I carried out field work in residential compounds at the La Bolsa 1 site.

#### *Ancestor Worship in Household Compound LB1-U14, La Bolsa 1 site*

La Bolsa 1 is a concentrated village site in the north of the Tafí Valley. La Bolsa 1 was inhabited between 2100 B.C. and 850 A.D. This settlement includes 21 household compounds and a 25 hectare complex system of agricultural structures. The site layout shows spontaneous expansion rather than formal community planning. Household compounds are spatially segregated architectural units of about 200 square meters that incorporate both food storage facilities and craft production workshops and show strong traces of kin identity. The dwellings include circular structures around open patios, with walls built of large field stones (Figure 2).

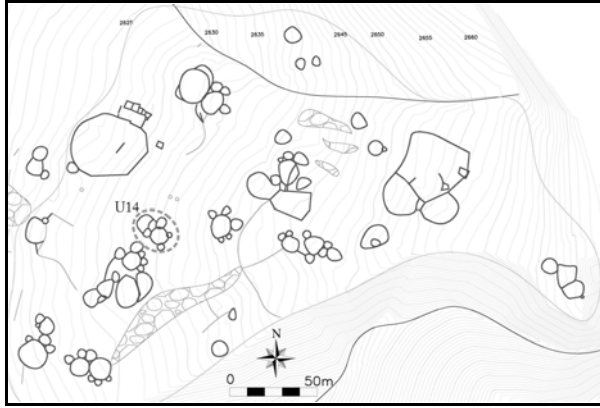


Figure 2: Plan of the central area of the La Bolsa 1 site, showing some of the architectural compounds.

I excavated two household compounds, LB1-U10 and LB1-U14, and diverse outdoor contexts in the central area of La Bolsa 1. Here I analyze the burial context recovered in the LB1-U14 residential unit.

LB1-U14 is a 200 square meter residential unit. It includes a circular patio, R1, four smaller enclosures, R2, R3, R4, and R6 linked to it through formal doors, and two peripheral structures entered through R4 and R6 (Figure 3).

The compound's plan is that of a recurrent pattern, seen contemporaneously in other geographical settings near Tafi, such as the Yocavil Valley and the Cajón Valley (Aschero and Ribotta 2007; Berberían and Nielsen 1988; Scattolin 2007). Centripetal domestic spaces are arranged around a central patio, the only structure with direct access to the exterior. This central place is a circular unroofed enclosure of 80 square meters which controls movement within the unit, and mediates access to the roofed structures of the house. I excavated the residential compound completely and recorded evidence of all the construction, depositional, and post-depositional events that left material traces.

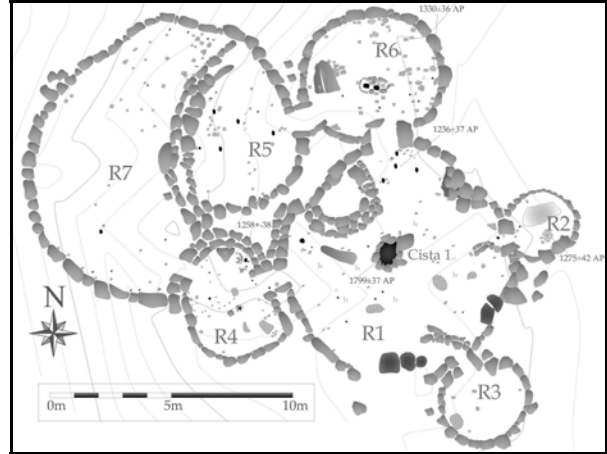


Figure 3. Plan of the LB1-U14 residential compound.

Analysis of architectural features and artefactual assemblages, soil chemistry studies, and phytolith identification allowed the recognition of activity areas in various parts of the residential compound. The occupation floors of five of the seven structures were dated from Cal A.D. 650 to Cal A.D. 850, corresponding to the last occupation of the compound before its abandonment.

The small peripheral enclosures show evidence of specific activities, especially food processing and cooking. In Structure R6 a few cooking vessels were broken around a central stone hearth. Maize (*Zea mays*) phytoliths were identified from within the soil samples taken from this area. Other activities detected are tool storage and sleeping and resting.

Diverse activities were detected in the central and biggest structure, R1. These include maize grinding, food storage within a special room, and ritual deposition of ceramic animal representations. Non-locally manufactured pottery fragments were present. In the central portion of this open patio, an oval feature was found. It was an underground, bell-shaped, stone-walled chamber, with a false dome closure

protruding 30 centimeters above the occupational floor. This structure, “Cista 1”, is a cist, a typical tomb type in Tañ Valley Early Ceramic Period sites.

At first glance, the cist could be seen as a single feature interpretable as simply evidence of a single household’s veneration of an ancestor because of the power, wealth or kinship relations he or she accumulated during life.

Indeed, this is the regular interpretation made of other, similar contexts. Nevertheless, the excavation of this burial showed that it was the result of complex depositional processes (Figure 4).

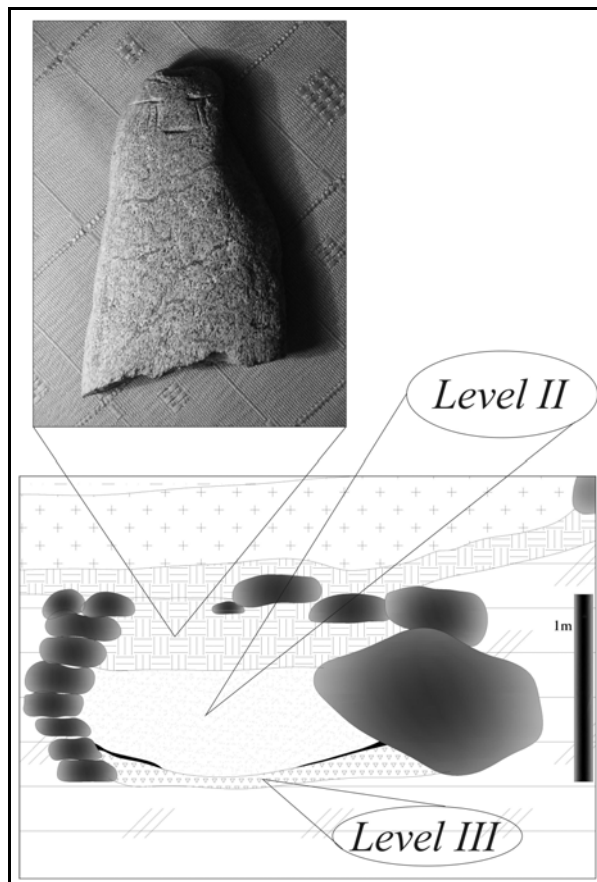


Figure 4: “Cista 1” section.

Just after the cist closure was removed, about 30 centimeters below the patio occupational floor, a small figurine was found. It is an anthropomorphic stone statuette of a woman. Her face has carved lines descending from her eyes which could represent tears, face-paint, tatoos, or scarification (Figure 4 top). The lower portion of this artifact has a flake scar, suggesting that it was intentionally broken or “killed” before deposition.

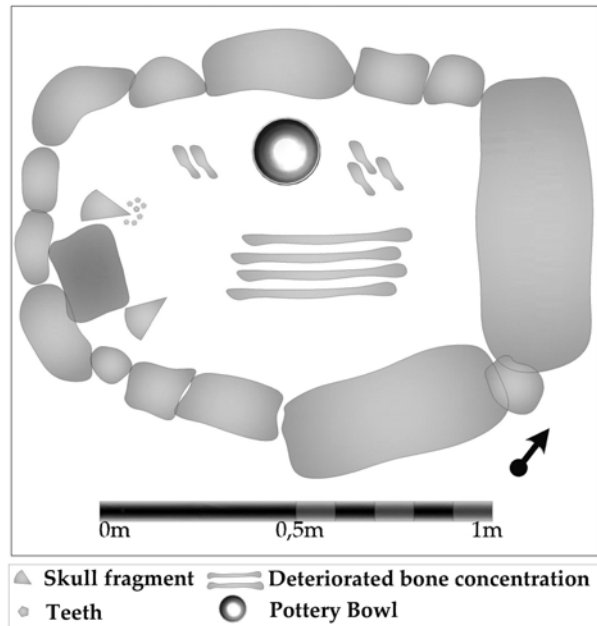


Figure 5: Schematic plan of Level II burial.

Next to the Level II base (80 centimeters below the occupation floor) in the eastern portion of the cist, I found human bones, in a very bad state of preservation, associated with a gray pottery bowl (Figure 5). Identifiable bone fragments were two skull pieces and twelve teeth. Studies of tooth wear traces and roots allowed us to establish that this person was an adult. Hundreds of unidentified bone fragments were recovered from the central area of the burial. Within these maize (*Zea mays*) and cucurbit (*Cucurbita* sp.) phytoliths were identified. These could be interpreted as the remains of the deceased’s final meal, or as part of the

grave goods accompanying the dead. The ceramic bowl, placed horizontally, is a fine, undecorated pottery vessel which could be typologically dated to *ca.* A.D. 500 to A.D. 900.

Below this level, a thin layer of burnt clay covered the entire structure. After its removal I detected a more compact stratum, Level III, where traces of another burial were present (Figure 6). It was composed of an adult's osteological remains, in a very bad state of preservation, associated with three coarse fabric vessels. The human remains were fragments of a skull and a jawbone in the western margin of the base of the cist, and hundreds of unidentified little pieces of bone. The skeletal remains were accompanied by a cup (made of ordinary red clay, with a rough surface finish, a lip handle vertically attached, and a modeled anthropomorphic face decoration applied on the side opposite the handle), a jar (technologically similar, with a uniform surface finish, no decoration, and a thick soot layer on the outer surface), and numerous fragments of vessels with similar characteristics. None of the pottery presents complex decoration, nor corresponds to what is known as "fine" craftsmanship for this period. Charred wood was recovered from this level and dated to  $1799 \pm 37$  BP, Cal. A.D. 130-260, the earliest date for LB1-U14.

The disposition of material indicated an intentional disturbance of the earliest burial, before depositing the final one. Bone remains were disposed next to the structure's wall and the ceramic jar was between the jaw and the skull.

Archaeological evidence recovered from the burial structure of household compound LB1-U14 allows me to propose that this context was created 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.

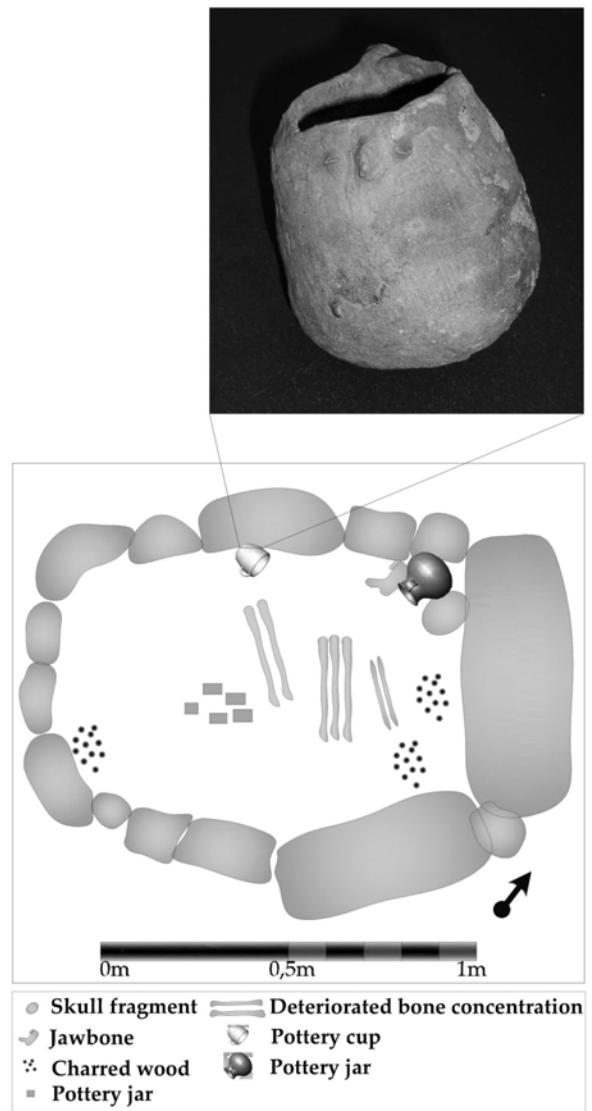


Figure 6: Level III burial.

On the contrary, I emphasize the information provided by this particular mixture (Bailey 2007; Lucas 2005; Olivier 1999). It demonstrates that ancestral corpses were not socially dead: they were continuously taken from their tombs, exhibited, worshiped, fed and reburied. In addition, 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, in a place of necessary passage, the locus where vital practices such as maize grinding and food storage were carried out. A major part of quotidian life took place there.

Gillespie (2001) states that the construction of social persons derives from acting within a context, as part of experience and daily practices. This includes relations between people, dead and alive, groups, and material objects (Brown and Walker 2008). The mortuary palimpsest analyzed in LB1-U14 is precisely the materialization of practices that create and strengthen kinship relations as living people interact with an ancestor's physical remains. These practices regarding death have a long duration, from the first centuries A.D. to ca. A.D.850. They formed the relationships between house dwellers and ancestor, which built the foundations of the household competitive group identity (Dillehay 1995).

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

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