

ANNUAL REPORT: VITOR VALLEY (PERU) 2013 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students reporting on illustration module directed by Mr. Ron Winters

GENERAL

The Vitor Archaeological Project (VAP) hosted its IFR field school between June 16 and July 20, 2013. During this season, students participating in the VAP field school conducted laboratory analysis of materials excavated from a Ramadas-affiliated cemetery during the 2012 season. This is the first systematic and multidisciplinary evaluation of a Ramadas complex in southern Peru, a cultural tradition that until now has only been defined by ceramics from a handful of mortuary contexts.

With the assistance of specialists, VAP project members examined, documented, photographed and housed human skeletal remains, ceramics, textiles, baskets and other artifacts from this unique Ramadas site. The goal of this season was to identify the biological and cultural patterns that characterize this collection, which will serve as a baseline for future osteological and cultural studies in the valley.

The laboratory season was organized into four hands-on teaching modules that included osteology, ceramics, illustration, and conservation. As we had a textile specialist in our team, students were also introduced to the basics of pre-Hispanic textile analysis and conservation. Furthermore, a complete mortuary context was evaluated in each module, combining skills acquired from each of the different learning modules. After a first week of introductory seminars in Andean archaeology, and visits to the most important archaeological sites in the valley, including the cemetery from which the collections were excavated, each student rotated through each module for an entire week. All together, students spent four weeks in the lab conducting cutting edge archaeological and bioarchaeological research.

LABORATORY MODULES

Osteology module (Professor: María Cecilia Lozada)

The focus of the osteology module was the study of the skeletal remains recovered from 9 disturbed burial pits in the Vitor Valley of southern Peru in 2012. This examination included several levels of analysis. The first stage of analysis consisted of recording data on the age and sex for each individual, as well as the documentation of skeletal markers of health and trauma. The second stage required each participant to interpret these data in order to construct a basic osteobiography of the studied skeletons.

Ceramic (Professor: Hans Barnard)

In this module, the pottery and other ceramic finds from the Ramadas cemetery, as well as from domestic Wari contexts excavated in 2012, were recorded and studied. Students learned how to do a technical drawing of ceramic sherds as well as to provide a technical written description. Drawings were digitized in a format that enabled analysis, storage, and publication. A (digital) photographic record was also made, following standard protocols for publication. Petrological thin sections were made of a representative sample of the ceramics. This entailed fixing a thin slice of the sample to a glass object slide and grinding this down to a pre-determined thickness (0.03 mm). At this thickness the slides were studied in cross-polarized light, which enables the determination of the mineral inclusions, as well as certain technological aspects of pottery production. The resulting slides were photographed in a systematic way using a digital eyepiece.

Textile analysis (Professor: Juana Lazo)

Textile analysis was another module that was critical to our interpretation of the site, as Ramadas textiles have not been fully investigated. We analyzed textile pieces uncovered from burial pits excavated in 2012 that were used to dress the body and produce the mummy bundle. Students who participated in this module learned the principles of textile analysis, including cleaning, drawing, and meticulous recording of the designs and techniques used in the elaboration of belts, shawls, tunics, etc. Furthermore, students observed the systematic unwrapping of mummy bundles and documented the way in which the body was dressed and prepared for the afterlife.

Illustration (Professor: Ron Winters)

In this module, students learned to illustrate in a professional manner a wide range of artifacts, a skill that is no less important than data tables, written descriptions, or photographs. Drawing in many ways is a more informative means of two-dimensional representation than photographs. The camera can only reveal what is exposed to the lens, while drawings can depict hidden as well as visible surfaces of the subject through the use of cut-aways, composite views, sectional views, roll-outs and other graphic conventions. In other words, drawings can depict an object as it exists rather than, as it is perceived. In this module, students learned to illustrate wooden and bone artifacts, baskets, obsidian points, beads, and shells excavated from the Ramadas cemetery. This work will be used in the VAP publications.

Conservation (Professor: Dawn Lohnas)

For the conservation module of the field school, the goal was to teach students the fundamentals of archaeological conservation and emphasize the responsibility that archaeologists have to curate the materials that they have uncovered. The role of conservation during excavation as well as during subsequent analysis in the lab (as compared to in museums

and other institutions) was covered. Proper handling of materials and options for controlling environment and storage (as well as what to do when options are limited) was also discussed. Issues that are frequently encountered when conserving excavated objects, such as the presence of salts and other forms of degradation, were reviewed, with particular emphasis on any problems that may be affecting the present collection. An overview of photographic principles and techniques was also covered. Once a basic understanding of conservation was established, students moved forward with processing the finds, with continued dialogue between students and the conservator as new objects and challenges were encountered. We reviewed human remains and artifacts from nine contexts, with the aim of documenting the pieces in their present condition, to allow for future monitoring, and to make recommendations for their future treatment/housing/testing.

RESULTS:

The skeletal collection from 9 tombs reveals important information on past activities including interpersonal violence between adult males and trophy head practices, restricted to adult males. The locations of the perforations in the frontal bone and the partial removal of the occipital appear to be similar in all trophy heads, suggesting some uniformity of practice. In contrast, adult females and children did not exhibit signs of visible trauma, suggesting that head hunting and physical conflict was inextricably linked to males. Our study also found that Ramadas tombs were collective, and that there was no selective practice when burying individuals in each burial.

After unwrapping mummy bundles, we determined that bodies were placed in a flexed position, and dressed in mortuary robes. These robes were manufactured using plain cloth and tailored according to the size of the body. Once the bodies were dressed with the mortuary robe, pieces of textiles were placed around the body to produce a mummy bundle, which was tied with colorful belts, some of them with fine feathers.

As these contexts were disturbed in the past, grave goods were limited in number. Non-decorated ceramics dominate our small collection. These plain ceramic vessels are globular and exhibit one or two spouts, and their microscopic features suggest significant differences in manufacture when compared to Wari assemblages. Additional artifacts such as spoons, necklaces, baskets and gourds were also examined in terms of manufacture, and style. As this is the first systematic study of the Ramadas tradition, this material is being carefully documented, illustrated and curated for publication and future comparative analysis.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

All member of the VAP field school participated in programmed community outreach initiatives, a practice that was initiated in previous seasons. This year, we visited the local school “Instituto Educacional Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre” to help explain to young “Vitoreños” the goals of our archaeological research in the valley. We were also invited to participate in their “Día del Logro” exhibition, a nationwide activity installed by the Ministerio de Educación to engage communication between students, families and schools. Furthermore, we participated in a volleyball match with their varsity team. The VAP team lost the match, but in the process we created solid bonds of friendship that will last long into the future.