Long-term Human Occupation of the Upper Río Caracha, Ayacucho, Peru

Daniel A Contreras, Kiel University
Nicholas Tripcevich

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/daniel_contreras/29/
LONG-TERM HUMAN OCCUPATION OF THE UPPER RÍO CARACHA, AYACUCHO, PERU

Daniel A. Contreras1 and Nicholas Tripcevich2

52nd Annual Meeting of the Institute of Andean Studies, 6-7 January 2012
1 Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute for Ecosystem Research, Kiel University, dcontreras@ecology.uni-kiel.de
2 Laboratory Manager, Archaeological Research Facility, UC Berkeley, tripcevich@berkeley.edu

Abstract
Regional consumption patterns of obsidian in Peru testify to the significance of the Quispispa source; by 500 BCE this obsidian was reaching sites 1000 km distant. The source area thus provides both an opportunity to investigate quarrying and an case study in the long-term occupation of a regionally important highland valley. Using satellite imagery and results of preliminary field prospection, we examine the upper Caracha drainage, where Quispispa-type obsidian is found. The valley is relatively well-terraced, and contains several large sites downstream of the source area. Our data on the settlement system and anthropogenic landscape of this regionally significant highland valley in southern Ayacucho demonstrate extensive occupation and suggest the viability of local historical trajectories in the central highlands.

Introduction
Regional evidence of consumption of Quispispa-type obsidian demonstrates that the source was known early in Peruvian prehistory (by at least 7000 BCE (Burger and Asano 1978, Burger and Glasscock 2002)), and that it was a widely distributed and extensively used material by the first millennium BCE (Figure 1). However, the source area has only recently been identified (Burger and Glasscock 2000; Burger and Glasscock 2002) and has never been rigorously surveyed. Moreover, while survey in the lower Caracha drainage (Vivanco and Vivanco 1996) has identified several substantial sites, these remain only preliminarily described and dated, and testly primarily in the Middle Horizon and later occupation. In short, the presence of the source of Quispispa-type obsidian suggests a lengthy human occupation of the Upper Caracha, but we still understand very little about the mode, tempo, and means of obsidian exploitation, and even less about the extent, chronology, and character of occupation of the region.

Nevertheless, it is evident at a glance that the valley was host to intensive prehispanic settlement, as below approximately 3500m the valley is extensively terraced (Figures 1 and 3a). As a result, even as we have focused on obsidian extraction in the area (see Tripcevich and Contreras 2011), we have been a program of remote survey and analysis of remote sensing data in order to characterize regional settlement and the anthropogenic landscape.

Methodology and Preliminary Fieldwork
 Areas of terracing were first ascertained on the basis of satellite imagery (WV-1 panchromatic, 50m resolution), and ground-truthed by site visits with both recreational and survey-grade GPS. Preliminary assessments of the chronology have been made by reference to architectural forms, construction techniques, and surface ceramics and lithics. Chronological assessments of terracing can thus far be made on the basis of associated sites and are necessarily tentative; see Schreiber 1981:271-273.

Results
Preliminary dating suggests at least two Formative Period sites (Figure 3b), apparently minimal Wari presence (Figure 3c), the only Middle Horizon ceramic yet found, and a wide area of sites associated with extensive terracing and provisionally dated to the LLIP (e.g. Figure 3d). Ethnohistoric sources (East 1963; Vivanco and Vivanco 1996) testify to a substantial link presence in the Caracha drainage, and to the establishment of minimal communities (possibly for maize production), but there is a very little archaeological evidence of this (which may have to do in part with locations of modern towns adjacent to Inka settlements). Occupational sites range from 3500-4000 m, with most dated under 1250 BCE.

The terraced landscape in the upper Caracha, based on satellite imagery and partially ground-truthed amounts to ~1250 ha in an ~19,000 ha study area, with ~350 ha as ~1700 m (see Figures 3a and 4). Terraced slopes range from 0-60°, with median slopes for each terraced zone generally between 35° and 45° - a subject not was not apparently a concern in Inka terracing. The terraced landscape is difficult to cate, but we provisionally assign it to the LLIP on the basis of this association with sites from that period, and the lack of obvious contrast in terrace construction styles. Terracing throughout the study area runs up to approximately 3750 m and apparently supported largely irrigated agriculture - very little associated canal infrastructure is apparent. The terraces are used primarily for grazing, gravel, and the modern town of Sacamambe, which has rehabilitated swales of terracing for cultivation.

The altitudinal limits of agriculture interpose a gap of approximately 1000m between the intensively settled-modified portion of the Upper Caracha and the obiedianitcm is automobile of La Ica. Links between the two are more circuitous than documented. Although obsidian may commonly be found in any site in the valley, the only site exhibiting quantities of debitage sufficient to suggest workshop activity is Mantacampa - primarily LLIP but with a Formative component. Although metallic roads is common in the area, and found in the valley, no obvious remnant road links the Jiccha Parcco obsidian quarries directly to downstream settlements.

Conclusion
Further and more complete survey, as well as more secure dating of sites and terracing, may well revise our understanding of the cultural trajectory of the upper Caracha. However, this preliminary work suggests a surprisingly tight imperial touch, and a significant contrast with comparable areas (e.g. Cañar/Gualaceo [Schreiber 1981] and the lower Caracha [Valdez and Vivanco 1994]). Both Wari and Inka peoples were apparently attracted by agricultural resources, expanding into maize-producing areas, and mineral resources were certainly also exploited. Moreover, the upper Caracha was not the hinterland of either polity, but a relatively productive valley, housing a significant and rare resource, lying only 100 km linear km from Wari and 330 linear km from Cusco. Nonetheless, it appears that the LLIP—generally seen as characterized by lower population densities and less political integration (Coyne 2008) - was the period of most intensive occupation and landscape transformation. Even if that chronology ultimately needs revision, this the local character of the upper Caracha suggests that research should focus on the ways in which prehistoric Andean peoples understood and managed resources, and on what sorts of policies and motivations were involved in extensive and intensive modifications of Andean landscapes.

Acknowledgments
We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Nacional de San Cristóbal de Huamanga in the research, and preliminary fieldwork has been possible thanks to the help of Carlos Llachis and to the Museo de Arqueología, Antropología, y Historia del Cusco and the Center for Andean Studies, the Berkeley Archaeological Research Facility and the Stanford Center for the Study of the Human Past.