

Posic C – a Sacred Complex in Ancient Posic, Northern Peru

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Abstract

In the Amazonian “Eyebrow of the Jungle” in northeastern Peru, an archaeological complex known as Posic has recently been investigated. Preliminary results comparing ethno-historical and archaeological records show that the site of Posic has the potential to illuminate the Amazonian people of the past; the Inca, Chachapoyas, and a local rainforest culture.

Introduction

On the eastern slopes of the Amazonian “Eyebrow of the Jungle” in northeastern Peru, close to the province of Chachapoyas, a large complex consisting of ruins and megalithic structures has recently been investigated. The prehistoric site is known from Spanish sources, where it is documented, among other things, as Posic, a site with gold deposits. Posic contains the remains of possibly three different cultures, including the Inca, Chachapoyas, and a local rainforest culture that is not yet precisely defined archaeologically.

In the summer of 2018 and 2019, a team of Danish and Peruvian archaeologists and students collaborated during intensive fieldwork to investigate the site which is hidden in the dense forest of the *Ceja de Selva* (eyebrow of the jungle). The Posic Archaeological Project is an archaeological sub-project that falls under Dr. Inge Schjellerup’s (National Museum of Denmark) interdisciplinary

project “Posic, a pre-Spanish ritual center in Huallaga, Peru”. In addition to archaeological studies, the project covers ethno-history to clarify who the indigenous peoples were, and in this case, to provide information about the chiefs and their confrontations with the Spaniards. In Schjellerup’s doctoral dissertation (1997) and in later publications (Schjellerup *et al.* 2003; 2005; 2009) she established the first archaeological and ethno-historical background of the site. This helped to give the Chachapoyas culture a prominent position within the cultural history of the Andean region. It is therefore not surprising that the discovery of Posic can also be attributed to Schjellerup.

Posic consists of several sectors; Posic A was a regional administrative centre of the Inca, located on the border of the Inca Empire. This strong Inca presence in an otherwise marginal area can only be understood as an expression

of a strong economic interest and the desire to suppress the Chachapoyas people. Posic B was a settlement belonging to the Chachapoyas culture, famous for their riots against the Incas. Posic C appears to be a sacred complex situated between Posic A and Posic B. Besides two large stone circles surrounding erected monoliths, the sector, Posic C, consists of different megalithic structures. One of the more extraordinary structures is the *Huaca Yacu*, a large semicircular building surrounding a natural freshwater spring. This article discusses the new discoveries of the Posic C complex and puts them in context by comparing the results with ethno-historical sources that mention the site of Posic and its encounters between the Spaniards and the indigenous peoples of the area.

Ethno-historical research

Ethno-historical studies on the various ethnic groups in the northeastern Ceja de Selva have so far gone unnoticed. However, they can clarify the history, events and testimonies contained in the historical documents in archives and other previously published documents. The ethno-history of the archaeological site Posic will briefly be illustrated in order to gain the necessary background knowledge of the history of Posic.

Posic and the search for El Dorado

Chronicles of the time document the ethnic groups in this “Eyebrow of the Jungle”, their resources, and how the Spanish expeditions searching for El Dorado brought wars, abuses and frauds. But they also mention how missionaries excelled in this challenging environment of harsh mountains, dense forests, and wild animals.



Fig. 1: Topographic map of the Luya and Chillaos province (Compañón 1978-94).

When the Spaniards arrived to Peru in 1532, Chachapoyas is mentioned as an Inca province, but soon new administrative divisions were organized into *Encomiendas* and *Corregimientos*. The Corregimientos were mainly based on former ethnic subgroups. By the 18th century Chachapoyas was divided into the provinces of Luya and Chillaos, adjacent to Posic and Chachapoyas (Fig. 1) (Compañón 1978-94).

The first encounter between the indigenous inhabitants and the Spaniards took place in the 1530s and 1540s when the Spaniards dispatched several expeditions into the interior land with the overwhelming desire of finding the mythical El Dorado. The foundation of the *San Juan de la Frontera de*



Fig. 2: The tenth captain, Challco Chima Inka (Poma 1615, 163).

Chachapoyas took place in 1538 by Alonso de Alvarado who then set out to explore further to the east.

Pedro de Samaniego and Juan Perez de Guevara accompanied Alonso de Alvarado, captain of the infantry, a man, who later managed to obtain most of Alvarado's *encomienda*¹.

When the Spanish entered further into the forested mountains, the land is described as well populated and many of the indigenous people fled for fear of the horses. The Incas had been forced to keep significant troops in the Chachapoyas province, “because they are very brave” (Fig. 2) (de la Espada [1557-1586], 160).

¹ It should be noted that the limits of the *encomenderos* land and the *repartimientos* in Chachapoyas and Moyobamba changed many times over the course of time due to the different interests of the *encomenderos* and *corregidores*.

This journey was thus quite problematic due to the resistance of the people. The first entries in the book of the Cabildo de Chachapoyas from 1544 refer to several attacks by the rainforests tribes towards the east, where the inhabitants were very rebellious towards the Spaniards and about the Motilonas as savages living in hamlets at the banks of Río Mayo or Río Moyobamba. (Rivera 1958).

In 1548 Juan Perez de Guevara became the first *encomendero* for the Repartimiento de Cochabamba, Leimebamba and Chilchos appointed by La Gasca. The Chilcho was in contrast to the others a Ceja de Selva group.

The territory of the Chilchos probably extended east to the Rio Huambo to include the village of Laya whose exact location is not known today. Further to the east was the ancient village of Posic. Espinoza Soriano wrongly locates Posic north of Rioja where another village is situated with the same name (Espinoza Soriano 2003, 34, 121).

During conversations in Omia, the nearest village to Posic today Señor Romulo Maldonado told the following legend of the ancient village of Posic:

The ancient village of Posic was populated by people dedicated to hunting, fishing and agriculture and there was a gold washing place near to the village. The inhabitants produced a chain of gold weighing about 40 arrobas (600 kg). It was so long it surrounded the temple, where they worshipped their gods. The chain was considered to be a god, so at pompous feasts and processions many men dressed in their traditional clothes and would walk around the temple. One day when the village was attacked unexpectedly in the dark by the Orejones tribe, and they, with despair, and realizing they were losing the fight, forced the door open of the temple and took the gold chain and after kissing it, they threw it into a deep well so it would not fall in the hands of the destroyers. When the chain went down the well it changed into a big lake as it is now (Huamanpata?). ... The lake is said to have become bewitched so when hunters go to these places and come to the lake or make noise, it triggers off a storm with tremendous force.

It is evident that there was a gold washing place in the river. Another story from around 1800 refers to using fleecy lambskin to filter the little grains of gold from the river (Schjellerup *et al.* 2009, 324). Posic was also known for its salt pans,” where the llamas come to drink and eat the salt” (BNL 1567, 163 ff.).

The *encomendero* Juan Pérez de Guevara had a “creative” way of thinking to extract more tribute in natural materials like cotton. It seems that the climate change known as the Little Ice Age affected the cultivation of cotton in the valley of the Chilcho. So Juan Perez de Guevara arranged for the Chilchos to attack the ethnic group of the Orimona

to expand his territory towards warmer areas for the cultivation of cotton. Juan Perez de Guevara forced some of the Chilcho, the Laya and the Posic, as mercenaries, to attack the Orimona. The Orimona lived more to the east. At that time, it appears Posic was put under the custody of Don Gomez de Toledo, cacique of the Chilcho indicating Posic as belonging to a subgroup under the Chilcho (Espinoza Soriano 2003, 81). The village and lands of Posic were three leguas (16, 5 km) from the village of the Orimona (Espinoza Soriano 2003, 154).

A trial in 1567-78 between Francisco Nuñez and Juan Pérez de Guevara opens a story of conflict between ethnicities, robberies, killings, abuse, and problems of the limits. Juan Perez de Guevara brought his Indians to the point of starvation with his excessive demands for tribute fees, for work in gold mines and in long houses for weaving (Schjellerup *et al.* 2005; Schjellerup 2008; BNL, 163). Thanks to this document, we know the names of the caciques and their tribes or ethnic groups and more or less of the location of their territories.

Several witnesses mention that Juan Perez de Guevara changed the name of Valle de Orimona to Valle de Ylicate and later to Panacote. He appears to have changed the names of some of the caciques to confuse the issue and in this way retain more tribute (BNL, 163 ff.).

A witness in the law case mentions “*the land was conquered and they brought war with each other and fortunately [sic!] did they kill each other which is well known*” (BNL, 198). However, before and during the Inca reign the ethnic groups of the Chilcho, Laya, Posic, Ypapuy and the Orimona in the Ceja de Selva did fight among themselves. They were belligerent groups.

With this seeming predisposition to vengeance, it was easy for the Spaniards to encourage the caciques to undertake acts

of revenge among themselves but it was no excuse for the Spaniards to be just as cruel against the Indians.

In another document that the authors have unfortunately not yet found, Espinosa Soriano mentions that Juan Pérez de Guevara regarded the people of Posic as savages.

“They do not practice agriculture or livestock, or textiles ... they are used to be headhunters, and they attack their neighboring villages during the night” (Espinosa Soriano 2003, 70). He sought to “civilize” them by teaching them the cultivation of maize, and set up a pig farm commissioned to a Francisco Jara, who stayed there a year and a half (1553-54) and in 1562.

The name of Posic is not found in the visitas from 1583 and 1590 but in 1586, there were ninety-one inhabitants in Posic. In less than thirty years, Posic did not convert into a state of being “wild.” Undoubtedly, Juan Pérez de Guevara wanted to describe the local Indians as savages to justify his plots. In the visita by Bishop Mogrovejo in 1593 we find information on the same place names and amount of people in this remote northern part of the country since his first visit in 1586 and his route to Moyobamba (Mogrovejo [1593] 1921, 49 and 1).

In 1684, Juan Lopez de Vargas learned that people were troubled by the long distances, and they were aggrieved with what they had; and he mentions that these Indians lived more than twenty-five leguas (137.5 km) from his encomienda. *“The aggrieved Indians withdrew more than eight leguas (44 km) leaving their houses and fields. I found them knowing that I had a mine in a passage called Posi, I found these Indians were perishing of hunger for having left their houses and crops so I had to leave my journey to help them and get them to return to their place from where they came where this passage begins; and where some very good neighbors and I could help them, indeed all of them should be reduced”* (Tena 1776, 186 ff.).

This information seems to be the end of the existence of the village of Posic as part of the encomienda of the Chilcho inhabitants, before the arrival of people from Omia in our time.

Historical sources document this region as a transitional zone between the highlands through the Ceja de Selva and Selva. One of the ancient roads went from Leimebamba – El valle de los Chilcho – Posic – Orimona – Soritor til Moyobamba but because of its many bogs and the fear of being attacked by heathen and savage Indians and attacked by jaguars the trail was probably abandoned in the 1600s. The area, the Ceja de la Selva became once again, covered by dense forests until the present day.

Archaeological research

Thanks to the ethno-historical research, we already have an idea of how Posic may have looked like in the past. We will now have a closer look at the archaeological investigations of the recent years and reassess if the previously discussed ethno-history of Posic can support the preliminary archaeological results.

The Posic site consists of several sectors; Posic A is the southernmost sector and consists mainly of remains from the Incas, which reached the region around 1470 AD and later fell to the Spaniards around the year 1535 (Schjellerup 2001, 8 ff.). Posic A was probably a regional Inca administration center with the characteristic standard architecture known from almost all Inca sites in the region (e.g. Schjellerup 1991; 1997; 2016; Schjellerup *et al.* 2005; 2009). Posic B is the northernmost sector and was a settlement consisting of the characteristic round houses from the Chachapoyas culture (c. 800-1470 AD). As part of the fieldwork in 2018, we found that the remains of Posic B were virtually no longer preserved due to deforestation and farming in the area.



Fig. 3: Siteplan of Posic C. Illustration by Gitte Lambertsen Hjortlund.

The 2018 and 2019 fieldwork seasons focused on documenting Posic C, which is located between Posic A and Posic B (Fig. 3), and contains remains mainly from the Chachapoyas culture. However, there also appears to be an earlier horizon from a local rainforest culture (Wadskjær & Hjortlund 2020) and it is also likely that some of the finds belong to the later Inca culture (Wadskjær 2019, 18). In addition, there are other sectors such as Posic D, E, F and G, which were discovered during the latest two field expeditions. These sectors have been defined and differentiated from a geographical, and not a cultural, point of view. These sectors have not yet been systematically investigated; however, Posic D, E, F and G are situated in relatively open landscapes, therefore it should be possible to add the different structures to the site plan with the help of georeferenced drone photos (Wadskjær *et al.* 2019, 25 ff.).

Huaca Yacu

In the 2018 expedition the team wanted to locate the source of a wetland area running north to south through the southern part of Posic C. Situated within a highly vegetated area, the natural freshwater spring was discovered. The water flows from out of the ground and formed a small stream that further south would create a large wetland area. The spring originates from what appears the center of a well-defined lowering in the landscape with steep sides. After a rough clearing of the area the team discovered that the slopes on each side were supported by stone walls. Furthermore, fragments of ceramics were found at the foot of the back wall, which may have been a deposit for the shrine. The pottery probably contained food or drink, such as coca leaves or *chicha* (maize beer). With the spring at its center, the semi-circular construction was interpreted as being a *huaca*, and it was named the *Huaca*



Fig. 4: The view of the Huaca upon arrival to the site. Photo by Kristoffer Damgaard.

Yacu, which means sacred water in the Inca language, Quechua, and is a name assigned to the structure by the project. A huaca is a place or an object from where the gods could be reached (Cobo 2010, 44 ff.), such as a sacred building or a shrine), a prominent feature of the natural landscape such as a cave or a spring or a sacred object such as. water from a sacred lake (Dean 2010, 2), while *yacu* means water. The water from the spring flows out of the structure's opening to the south and creates a wetland perfect for watering the various terraces created on both sides of the wetland. It was therefore important for the indigenous people to ensure the continuing course of the spring and it is easy to believe that this life giving spring had been worshipped, why a shrine had been constructed around it. The walls of Huaca Yacu are about 4 meters tall and 2 meters wide. There are considerable differences in altitude level from within the structure to the outside of the structure, where the inside is almost 3-4 meters lower than the plateau that lies outside the wall. The

structure's circumference measures at least 45 meters, but the structure continues towards south, however, highly covered by vegetation at the moment, which is why it has not been further documented yet.

It is important to state that it is not the construction itself that is referred to as the Huaca Yacu, but in fact the context; the natural freshwater spring with the construction surrounding it. The construction itself is therefore not only marking the spring, but also serves a practical function in preventing erosion from covering the spring. It is therefore not the construction that has been worshipped but more likely what this structure contains – the spring.

This area was selected to be the most extensively investigated area of Posic during the season of 2019. Upon arrival to Posic C, it was clear that the local farmers had expanded their territories by almost cutting down all vegetation around the huaca (Fig. 4). This saved us a lot of time, but unfortunately the farmers are not as careful as archaeologists



Fig. 5: Round house found close to the huaca – Unit 5a. Photo by Kristoffer Damgaard.

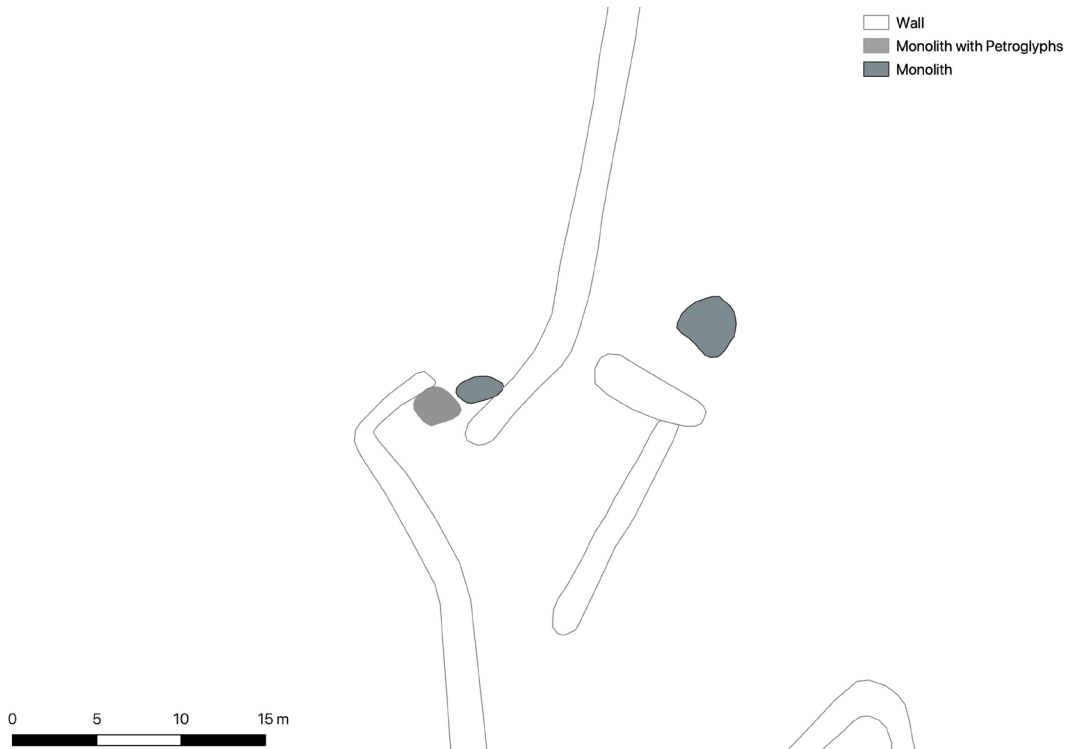


Fig. 6: Overview of Unit 5b including the great megalith and a part of the back wall. Photo by Sabrina Autenrieth.



Fig. 7: The natural water spring streaming out from below the megalith in Unit 5b. Photo by Lasse Rievers Olesen.

are, resulting in stones being displaced by the falling of large trees. It also means that the area is now easily accessible for the destructive cattle in the area.

After removing the cut down vegetation, we discovered the foundation of a relatively large round house on the upper plateau to the west of the huaca (Fig. 5). Later we, furthermore, discovered several others round structures west of the first round house; these were, however, not as well-preserved. On the eastern plateau, which is sloping further upwards towards east, we discovered around five terraces which we could track all the way south to the terraces at the wetland area.

We opened one excavation unit within the round house on the upper level (Unit 5a), one inside the huaca in front of a huge megalith incorporated in the well-preserved back wall of the huaca (Unit 5b) (Fig. 6) and one around the spring in the center of the huaca (Unit 5c). From Unit 5b we retrieved almost half of all the ceramics from the 2019 field season (735 out of ca. 1500 sherds), which in itself attests to an importance of this area. A considerable

amount of these is painted, which indicates that not just everyday ceramics were deposited here. Reaching the bottom of the great megalith in the back wall, sterile soil marked the end of the cultural layer. It turned out that the spring actually originated from beneath the megalith and continued underground to where we discovered the spring in the first place (Fig. 7).

The huaca, delivering the majority of the found ceramics from 2019 proves to be an intriguing feature. However, the feature needs a deeper analysis including the distribution of artefacts within the huaca and the examination of the artefacts themselves (production and decoration).

Local farmer, Don Oreste told us that he will grow potatoes inside the huaca, which is understandable since the soil in the huaca is moist and fertile. However, this means it will be impossible to conduct further investigations at a later point in time. With the documentation of the excavated area and the collected artefacts, a more precise analysis and interpretation of the huaca should be possible in the future nonetheless.

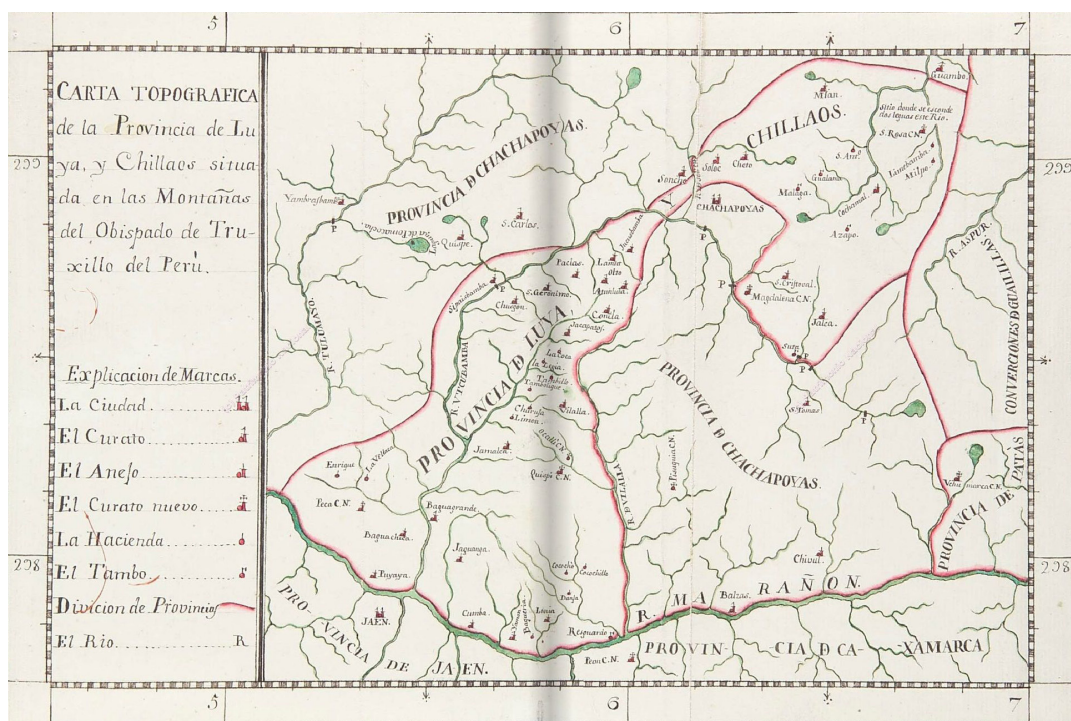


Fig. 8: Overview of the two megaliths and the wall systems constructing an enclosure – Unit 6. Illustration by Gitte Lambertsen Hjortlund.

Other ritual structures

The huaca described above is not the only ritual structure of interest that has been discovered in Posic C. In the west of the huaca, in a similar area; two large megaliths, the largest covered with rock carvings, have been incorporated into an enclosure formed by different wall elements (Fig. 8). The two large megaliths seem to have been deposited naturally; however, they have been incorporated into the structures artificially. Stone walls leading from different directions meet around these megaliths and form an enclosure with an opening towards, what has been interpreted as, a communal *plaza*. The carved megalith is located in the centre of a relatively small enclosure in an area which is situated at a lower level than outside.

At the end of the northern wall of the enclosure, another megalithic complex was located. Scattered stone structures, often consisting of erected megaliths and smaller stones form this complex. Several of the great megaliths were apparently overturned, and the area is now characterized by what looks like a south-facing semicircle of eight meters in diameter, consisting of large erected and overturned megaliths (Fig. 9). Some of the large megaliths had incised petroglyphs on the flat, downward long sides consisting of cup marks and elongated furrows, which supports the theory that these megaliths are overturned. It has previously been suggested that such rock carvings and stone installations in Posic probably depict astronomical observations made in certain rituals and ceremonies (Schjellerup 2016, 75 ff.).



Fig. 9: Overview of the megalith complex with several overturned megaliths – Unit 2. Photo by Andreas Valentin Wadskjær.

In the northern part of the megalithic complex, there is a path which is used today, but which seem to originate from pre-Columbian times possibly Inca times due to its relation to the north-south going *Camino Inca* (paved Inca road) to the east. Cobblestones on the path, the fact it encircles different pre-Columbian structures and that it crosses rock cut stairs dated to the Inca culture support this argument. If one follows the path northwest one will arrive at two stone circles measuring respectively 7 meters and 4.5 meters in diameter with an erected megalith located close to their centers. These stone circles do not have any obvious practical function, and they should therefore be considered as a form of communal structure for rituals or assemblies. There is no obvious entrance in the circle, nor is there any indication that the structures have had walls or roofs. The stone

circles are furthermore some of the first things one sees when one enters the area from the river to the west.

Conclusion

It should be noted that historic records in written form should always be handled with caution. Written records entail personal opinions, perceptions and agendas. Historical records by explorers often include stories about the primitive inhabitants and it can be assumed that specific parts about those groups are being left out intentionally or unintentionally. In other words, historic records are a good way to compare the archaeological record with written documents, but they should never be the sole base of interpretations.

An example is the comparison of the description documented by Juan Pérez de Guevara in 1562, which states the inhabitants of Posic did not practice agriculture, with our archaeological research. There appears to be a substantial discrepancy. The site of Posic shows extensive traces of well elaborated stone terracing for agriculture dating to before the Spaniards' arrival to Peru, probably for the cultivation of maize given this crop's significance for the Incas. So how could the natives at Posic know nothing of this type of agriculture?

Ritual acts that have been performed at Posic C, are expressed by the many complex constructions without any practical function. These include, amongst others, stone circles with erected megaliths in their centers, as well as various erected megaliths covered with rock carvings. In addition, there are other shrines, such as Huaca Yacu, which probably served as both a shrine where ceramic vessels could be deposited as offerings containing various crops. However, the construction also served to preserve the natural water source, which formed the vast wetland to the south, that

played an essential role in connection with the maintenance of the many terraces and what has been cultivated on these.

The project perspectives the dynamic processes in the conquest situation in an otherwise unknown rainforest area, where the communication systems in the area were based on the existence of a communication network that helped create the social cohesion between the often dispersed populations and was central to the authorities' control (Newman, M., Barabási, A.-L. & Watts, D.J. 2006). The settlement and the road had to be maintained in the dense forest area with many dangers. The Incas were to be sure of the maintenance of their entire religious infrastructure and impress the locals with almost constant rituals performed according to the calendar in Cuzco. The Posic were required to perform ceremonies and sacrifices. The concepts of acting and drama provoked and fostered a realization that was expressed in the ideological aspects as part of economic and political control.

Posic thus exhibits various architectural features not known from other sites in terracing forms, the distinctive petroglyphs and the megalithic complex, which is not yet known in the field of archeological research in Peru. Posic is a completely unique site with evidence of three different cultures.

In order to understand the history of Posic and its people, further fieldwork and an in-depth analysis are needed. In the coming years, we hope to uncover more of Posic's secrets by exploring the surrounding areas and by looking more closely at the so far discovered material as well as written records to understand how the historical documents relate to archaeological evidence.

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