

## *Chapter 3*

# *Out in the Streets of Moche* **Urbanism and Sociopolitical Organization at a Moche IV Urban Center**

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present new archaeological discoveries made over five years (1995–1999) at the site I call “Huacas of Moche” (also known in the literature as Moche and as Huaca del Sol-Huaca de la Luna). The Huacas of Moche site has a long history of occupation, going back to at least several centuries before Christ (Bawden 1996). I will concentrate on the latest occupations, all related to phase IV in the relative chronological framework of Moche Civilization. In absolute time I am dealing with the period between AD 400–700. I focus this paper on the new architectural and organizational understanding that has been achieved of this unique precolumbian center located in the lower part of the Moche Valley.

When the Moche decided to build and then expand their settlement they chose an already occupied landscape. Using natural features such as the Moche River and isolated hills such as Cerro Blanco and Cerro Negro, the Moche selected this place for specific reasons, not only economic, but also political and religious. I will not expand on this aspect. Rather, I am concerned with the constructed landscape in order to see its transformation from a religious or ceremonial center to a more complex urban settlement as it went through progressive stages over centuries. The size of the estimated population (an estimate of no less than 5000 as a very conservative number), the size of the settlement (60 ha), the size of its monuments, the complexity of settlement layout, and the diversity of inhabitants’ social and economic activities at the site all imply that the Moche built their

biggest settlement in the lower Moche Valley. This site gradually became an advanced urban center.

## **THE ZUM (ZONA URBANA MOCHE/URBAN SECTOR OF MOCHE) PROJECT**

We started the ZUM Project investigating the urban character of the Huacas of Moche site in 1995, knowing that “the long, complex occupational history of the site and imprecise dating of relevant structures hamper attempts to better define the extent and nature of Mochica urbanism at Moche” (Shimada 1994a: 113). This long-term project was integrated from the start with a larger Peruvian project centered on the Huaca de la Luna complex that is directed by Dr. Santiago Uceda Castillo. Our objectives were complementary and the general goal was to better understand the Huacas of Moche site (Uceda and Chapdelaine 1998).

We worked in the plain between the Huaca del Sol and the Huaca de la Luna. Our basic field strategy was to conduct a horizontal dig. The first step was to clean the rooms visible from the surface until the first solid plastered clay floor was reached. The delimitation of architectural complexes was the second step. Study of domestic architecture at the Huacas of Moche site was made difficult by the sand and clay sediments covering much of the suspected architecture between the two monumental buildings. This situation contrasts with the urban layouts visible on the surface at such regional centers as Galindo (Bawden 1996) and Pampa Grande (Shimada 1994).

The urban character of the Huacas of Moche site was first proposed by Max Uhle at the end of the last century (Uhle 1913). The first systematic investigation of Uhle’s proposed town between the two monumental constructions came with the doctoral dissertation of Theresa Lange Topic in 1977 and her subsequent seminal publication in 1982. More than two decades later, we finally have a better idea of what was below the sand cover in the southern part of the plain. The picture emerging is one of complete occupation of the space between the two major public buildings (Figure 3.1). It should be pointed out that blank areas on Figure 3.1 are not empty spaces but rather signify that no architectural remains are visible on the modern surface.

Both the type of construction and the cultural material encountered over the study area (about  $500 \times 300 \times \text{m}$ ) are indicators of a homogeneously distributed population during the Moche IV phase. Our excavations were primarily limited to the soil layers from the surface to the first good plastered clay floor. This means that, in general, the depth of our excavation never exceeded 1.5 m. All the material recovered may have belonged to the latest occupations with the exception of a minor amount of artifacts in a secondary context as a result of the looters activities penetrating below that first clay floor.

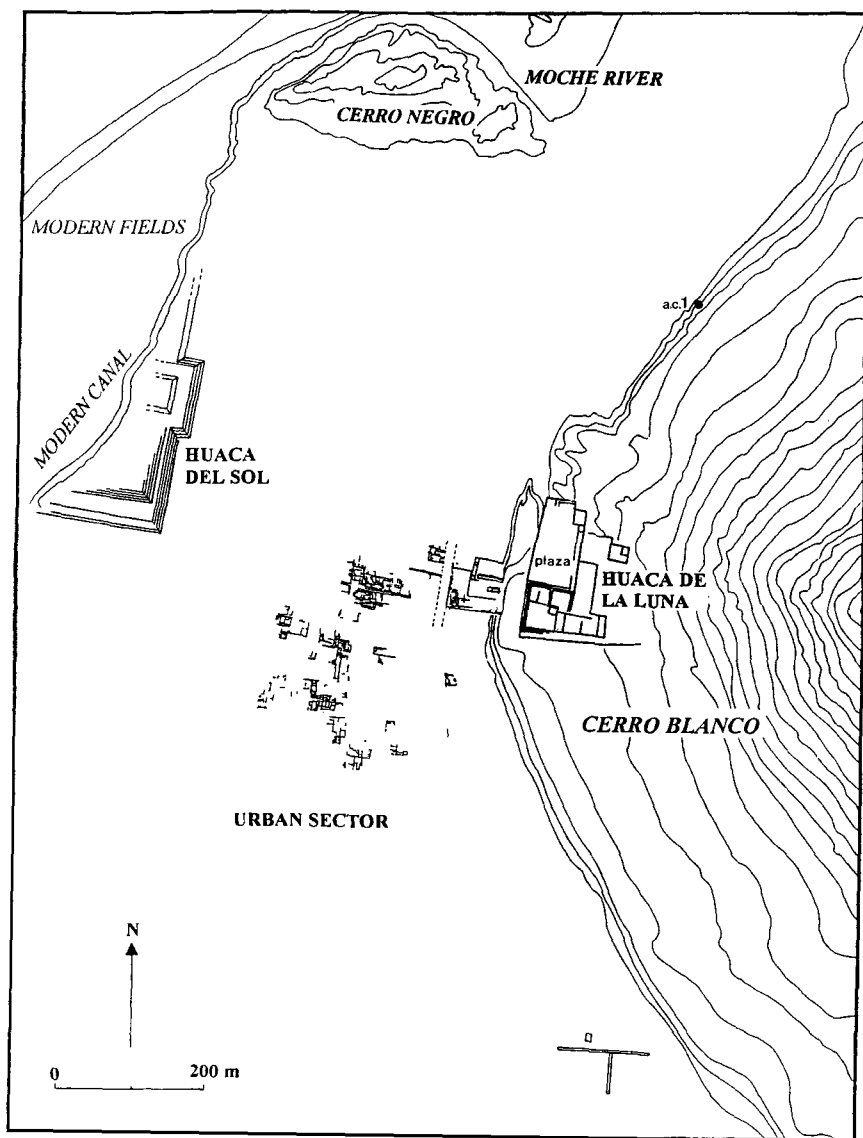


Figure 3.1. General map of the Huacas of Moche site.

At the start of our project, we wanted to know how the people living between the two monumental buildings managed their daily life. This was the fundamental reason for our project in the flat area between the two huacas. Our goal was to understand the spatial organization, domestic architecture, and socio-economic

status of its inhabitants. It was also our intention to use these data on urbanism to study Moche sociopolitical organization. I therefore continue with a presentation of the new urban data on the Huacas of Moche site. This will be followed by a discussion of the nature of Moche urbanism and its sociopolitical organization.

## URBAN DATA

To study urbanism, it was necessary to select a specific scale and we chose the household or domestic compound. We were interested in the layout of these urban elements, their functions, the activities carried out within these multi-room complexes and the status of the occupants. The archaeology of households was thus the scope of our research. The formal and functional variability of the excavated rooms and compounds is great and we will address this diversity. We must then look at the data at two different but interrelated levels: (a) the layout of the urban elements and functions attributable to these organizational features; (b) the activities carried out within these multi-room complexes and the status of the occupants.

### **The Layout of the Urban Elements and Functions Attributable to These Organizational Features**

Looking at the general map of the site (Figure 3.1) and at the location of residential compounds (Figure 3.2), four elements are striking.

First, there are the two great monumental buildings that constitute limits for the site: Huaca del Sol, the western limit, is parallel to the Moche River, and Huaca de la Luna, the eastern limit, is located at the foot of Cerro Blanco. These two buildings add to the natural landscape by delimiting the area with the small Cerro Negro as the northern limit. The southern limit is open and only sand deposition prevents us from verifying the extension of the Huacas of Moche site toward the ocean.

Second, there are the streets that give a sense of order. The largest is located parallel to the Huaca de la Luna and seems to serve as a social and religious boundary, separating public buildings and the adjacent elite residences (#8 and #18) from other residential quarters (Uceda and Chapdelaine 1998). The discovery of trophy heads (Verano et al. 1999) points to the religious character of compound #8 which is within the Huaca de la Luna complex on the eastern side of the street. Other streets follow the same north-south and east-west orientation, delimiting large blocks of rooms.

Third, there are plazas or public spaces within domestic quarters that were connected to various sectors by the streets. Formerly, small plazas were not recognized in Moche architecture. Only large public spaces associated with temples

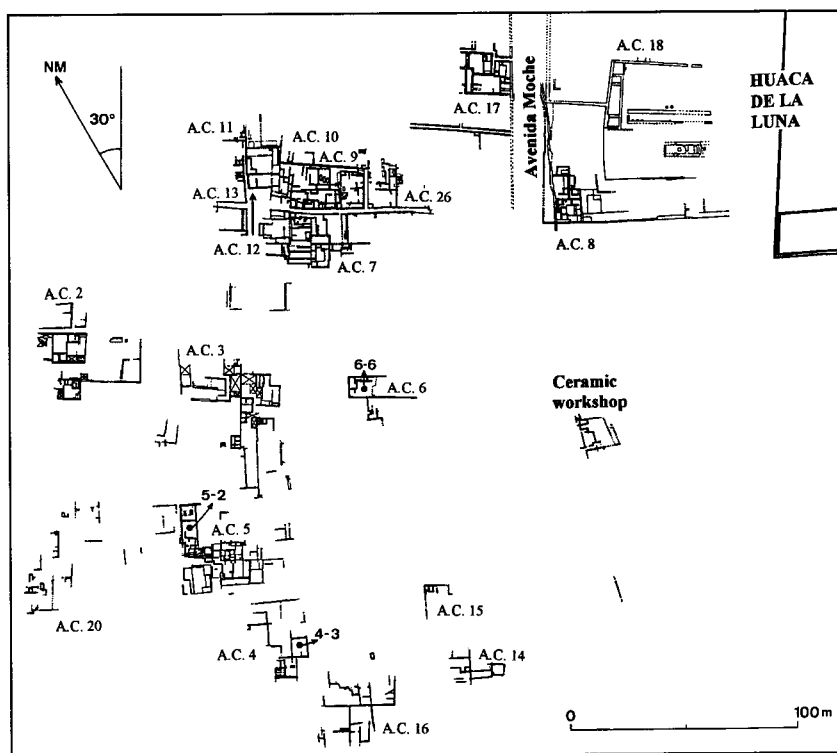


Figure 3.2. Location of the Moche residential compounds discussed in the text.

or administrative buildings had been documented previously (Bawden 1996; Moseley and Day 1982).

Fourth, we can consider the size and organization of the residential compounds. These residential compounds seem to have had multiple functions.

The precise functions of the two huacas are still debated. Huaca de la Luna is the best studied of them and its complexity grows with each new field season (Uceda and Canziani 1998). Both massive architectural complexes probably served religious, social and political purposes. The two huacas are the expression of a centralized power, but the relation between them remains unknown.

Our fieldwork in the central sector between the two huacas was aimed at delimiting several architectural compounds. This fieldwork also resulted in the identification of streets. The streets are narrow, usually less than 2 m wide, and they are connected to each other in a well defined pattern (Figure 3.3). The identification of streets is one of the key features that revises our interpretation of the Huacas of Moche site as a city (Figure 3.4). Spatial organization emerges with the



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