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MICROSCOPIC ANALYSIS OF BOTANICAL RESIDUES FROM CERRO ESMERALDA BURIAL IN NORTHERN CHILE: STATE AND DEATH

RITUAL IMPLICATIONS

Bernardo Arriaza, Juan Ogalde, Juan Chacama, Vivien Standen, Luis Huaman, Fiorella Villanueva, Natalia Aravena, Pablo Méndez-Quiros and Pedro Tapia

SUMMARY

In this paper we examine five offerings from a funeral context found at Cerro Esmeralda, an Inca burial ground in the Iquique coast of northern Chile. We focus on the identification of utilized plants, and investigate the consumption of chicha during this mortuary ritual. We brushed and scraped aríbalos vessels and chuspa bags with sterile lab tools and collected and analyzed micro-samples for starch and phytoliths. We identified Zea mays starch, Cucurbita sp./Lagenaria sp., and a few grains of Manihot starch. The identified phytoliths that were present included festucodeae, dicotyledons, and graminoids. These results and this context suggest the consumption of high-quality chicha in the Inca regional funeral setting. Several possible interpretive scenarios are suggested, including the use of various types of plants to optimize the maize fermenting process; ritualistic consumption of chicha to feast with the dead (comer con el muerto); ancient anthropogenic contamination of the vessels due to different types of daily uses; and, finally, as social and ritual activities associated with all these possible scenarios.

Introduction

During the Tawantinsuyu or Inca Empire, chicha (corn beer) consumption, politics, and human sacrifices were intimately intertwined with reciprocity, alliances, and hospitality, which were key components of the Inca state’s goals of conquest, control, and expansion (Morris, 1974; Morris and Thompson, 1985; Dillehay, 2003; Morris and Covey, 2003; Bray, 2009; Morris et al., 2011). One of these types of human sacrifices was the Capacocha rituals described by several chroniclers of the Andean region (Molina 1943 [1575], Guamán Poma 1980 [1615], Cobo 1990 [1653], Betanzos 1996 [1557], Sarmiento de Gamboa, 2007 [1572]). Their ethnohistorical accounts correlate with archaeological records (Mosiny, 1957; Reinhard, 1999, 2005; Chávez, 2001; Ceruti, 2003a, b; Cummins, 2004; Bray et al., 2005; Bray, 2009). These human sacrifices were performed in commemoration of historical events in the life of the Inca emperor or in response to natural catastrophes, whereas the provinces of the Tawantinsuyu were socially and politically linked to the Cusco capital through this ritualistic practice of human sacrifice (Cobo, 1990; Ceruti, 2003b; Reinhard and Ceruti, 2010; Andrushko et al., 2011). A Capacocha site has been characterized as having the following inhumation archaeological features: a) the sacrifice of one or several children of both sexes; b) burials in an important Andean mountain peak or special regional place; c) large and lavish ceramic grave goods (aríbalos among others); d) fine clothes/garments (cumbí among others); e) miniature Spondylus sp., silver and gold anthropomorphific figures decorated with exotic feathers and clothes in addition to miniature camelds made of the same type of metals; f) exotic goods such as feathers, cinnabar pigment, and Spondylus shells; g) food offerings such as chuspa bags with coca leaves and edible products (e.g., jerky, corn). Along with the mentioned features, the fermented maize drink called chicha was prepared for this ritual (Molina, 1943; Guamán Poma, 1980; Cobo, 1990; Betanzos, 1996; Ceruti, 2003a, b, 2015; Cummins, 2004; Bray et al., 2005; Sarmiento de Gamboa, 2007; Bray, 2009; Reinhard and Ceruti, 2010; Wilson et al., 2013).

Today, about 18 of these sites have been discovered, many showing the presence of aríbalos or vessels to store and transport chicha. Capacocha sites from the high Andean mountains, 6000masl, include Cerro Ampato in the Colca...
En este trabajo se estudian cinco ofrendas del contexto fúnebre Inca de Cerro Esmeralda, Iquique, costa norte de Chile, con el propósito de contribuir a identificar los tipos de plantas utilizadas y en particular ahondar en el estudio del consumo de chicha asociado a este ritual mortuorio. Utilizando técnicas de raspado y cepillado con elementos estériles se extrajeron muestras de sedimentos de jarras y chuspas ofrendadas para análisis de amídones y fitólitos. Se logró identificar amídones de Zea mays, Cucurbita sp./Lagenaria sp., Phaseolus sp. y un grano de posible Manihot. En cuanto a los fitólitos, los principales hallazgos incluyen la presencia de festucoides, dicotiledóneas y gramíneas. Estos datos y su contexto sugieren el consumo de chicha de buena calidad en un escenario Inca regional. Se presentan varios escenarios de interpretación como por ejemplo el uso de diferentes materias primas vegetales para optimizar la fermentación, un uso ritualístico de ‘comer con el muerto’, posible contaminación antropológica de las vasijas durante varios usos cotidianos y, por último, actividades sociales y rituales asociada al conjunto de estos probables escenarios.
Incan human sacrifice, we focus on micro-sampling of the Iquique aríbalos and analyzing their inner surfaces to shed light on the types of fermented drinks the vessels actually contained. We also considered the vegetable-associated materials found in the grave goods. We show that the Cerro Esmeralda aríbalos and bags have evidence of fermentable micro-botanical remains (starch and phytoliths). Finally, we discuss the role of chicha in this ritual and the cultural significance of these vegetable materials.

Materials and Methods

The uniqueness of the Cerro Esmeralda burial and grave goods encouraged the Iquique city museum staff to keep this finding under limited access to handling and research. Thus, we were given a special permit to briefly analyze the Cerro Esmeralda grave goods stored at Museo Regional de Iquique (MRI). We searched for the two aríbalos (Figure 1) described by Checura (1977) and vegetable remains with fermenting potential. Table I shows the five organic samples we collected. One sample was taken by brushing an aríbalo orange-reddish sherd without decoration (MRI 0010). Two samples were conchos or compacted brown organic residues recovered from the bottom of the vessels: a) concho sample (MRI 0102) from the bottom of fragmented aríbalo MRI 0010 and b) concho sample stored in a museum bag labeled ‘sediment from vessel’ (MRI 0107). Two samples were taken from vegetable material: a) one from a museum petri dish (MRI 0112) with vegetal residues and b) the other from a chuspa bag (MRI 0113) containing residues.

Samples were collected using disposable brushes, scalpel surgical blades, and starch-free gloves. New brushes and blades were used for each sample. All samples were stored in sterile containers and analyzed for starch and phytoliths. We took standard safety precautions to avoid contamination (safety cabinet, starch-free gloves, and sterilized materials) during sample processing.

Starches are polymers of carbohydrates and phytoliths are minerals found in plant tissue, both of which have a specific shape and size depending on the type of plant (Pearsall et al., 2003; Babot, 2004; Perry et al., 2006; Piperno, 2006). To isolate micro-remains we used the combined technique of starch and phytolith recovery proposed by Horrocks (2005). This procedure consists of separating the remains by density using zinc bromide solutions (1.8-1.9g·mL⁻¹ for the recovery of starch and 2.3g·mL⁻¹ to recover phytoliths). Four drops from the solution were mounted on slides.

The starch observation was undertaken by mounting the sample with five drops of glycercin and using a microscope with cross-polarized light at a 400× magnification. The phytolith samples were mounted using a Permount™ medium and observed under a bright-field light microscope.

The morphology and size of the starch grains and phytoliths were taken into account to determine the type of plant present by means of comparison with micro-remain catalogs, specialized literature and comparative (normal and fermented) samples of starch grains and phytoliths (Pearsall et al., 2003; Babot, 2004; Perry et al., 2006; Piperno, 2006; Hart, 2010; Arriaza et al., 2015). However, the absence of certain phytolith plants does not necessarily imply the absence of the plant itself because there are certain taxa that do not produce phytoliths or that do produce non-diagnostic phytolith forms (Piperno, 2006). In addition, two samples (aríbalo sediment MRI 0102 and vegetal remains MRI 0112) were microscopically examined for macro-remains.

Results

Of the five samples analyzed (Table II), two (MRI 0112 and MRI 0113) were positive for macro-remains but negative for starch grains. The other three samples—the two vessel sediments (conchos) from samples MRI 0102 and MRI 0101, and the sherd brushing (on MRI 0010)—were positive for starch grains but negative for macro-remains, not showing any identifiable plant remains (e.g., cuticle or grains). However, there were a few starch grains

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**TABLE I**

SAMPLES ANALYZED FOR STARCH AND PHYTOLITHS FROM CERRO ESMERALDA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arica Lab N° (MIO)</th>
<th>Iquique Museum reference number</th>
<th>Type of artifact</th>
<th>Type of sample</th>
<th>Weight (g)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>782</td>
<td>MRI 0010 Caja 7</td>
<td>Aríbalo sherd</td>
<td>Organic sediment brushed from a ceramic fragment that corresponds to the aríbalo bottom.</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>786</td>
<td>MRI 0102 Caja 11</td>
<td>Aríbalo fragmented</td>
<td>Compact organic sediment from the aríbalo bottom. The sediment is V-shaped, similar to the aríbalo base.</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>793</td>
<td>MRI 0107 Caja 11</td>
<td>Vessel</td>
<td>Compact organic sediment associated with vessel content.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>794</td>
<td>MRI 0112 Caja 11</td>
<td>Bag</td>
<td>Vegetable sample of seeds, leaves, and fruit.</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>795</td>
<td>MRI 0113 Caja 11</td>
<td>Chuspa bag</td>
<td>Organic sediment associated with chuspa bag.</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
including Zea mays (corn), different types of Phaseolus sp. (common beans or beans) and Cucurbita/Lagenaria (gourds). We also observed, in the compact organic aríbalo sediment sample (MRI 0102), agglomerates of Phaseolus sp. starch, which suggested cooking. The other grain types that were found appeared to be non-clustered (normal). The brushing sediment of the aríbalo sherd (MRI 0010) showed the presence of ground Zea mays starch, Cucurbita/Lagenaria (squash/gourd), and possible Manihot (Figures 2a-f). None of the starch showed signs of fermentation and none of the samples revealed the presence of Prosopis sp. or psychoactive plant residues, which could have been added to the drinks during the mortuary rituals.

Phytolith analysis identified the presence of eight morphotypes coming from seven different taxa: wavy/polylobed (Subf. Bambusoideae), bilobate punctate (Subf. Festucoideae), bilobate (Subf. Panicoideae), polylolate (Subf. Pooidae), rondel (Zea mays), acicular (Cyperaceae), and elongated echinated I (graminoids). Furthermore, few sponge spicules and Epithemia diatoms were identified (Figures 3a-j). The aríbalo compact sediment sample (MRI 0102) presented the highest diversity of morphotypes (N=7). Many of the found morphotypes correspond to taxa belonging to the monocotyledonous group, which include Zea mays and the Poaceae family morphotypes: Bambusoideae, Festucoideae, Panicoideae, and Pooidae (Figure 4). Finally, the macro-remains analysis showed that sample MRI 0112 were fern leaves and Schinus sp. (seeds and fruits).

### Discussion

The presence of starch grains and phytoliths of Zea mays in sherd brushing on aríbalo (MRI 0010) and concho compacted brown organic residues (MRI 0102) recovered from the bottom of a fragmented aríbalo suggests these vessels contained corn chicha. In other words, the aríbalo was full of chicha when they were interred in the burial. The analysis of the residues showed corn starch but not clear fermented (starch) granules, including the MRI 0107 concho sample. Despite the lack of evidence of fermented grain starch (but presence of maize starch), it is still possible that the aríbalo contained chicha.

This proposition is based on the fact that the aríbalo is one of the ceramic vessels associated with imperial drinking paraphernalia of the Late period or Inca Horizon (1430-1532 A.D.), particularly at Cusco city, where chicha drinking was highly structured, ritualized, and controlled by the Inca state (Molina, 1943; Lumbreras, 1969; Guaman Poma, 1980; Betanzos, 1996; Dillehay, 2003; Cobo, 1990; Sarmiento de Gamboa, 2007). These dates for the Inca Horizon vary according to the geographic region and the type of samples dated, among other variables (Cornejo, 2014). Despite the large presence of fine and compacted organic ground residues (conchos) analyzed, we did not observe fermented starch or the macro-remains of corn residues or other plants. Thus, we propose that this negative finding suggests a careful fermenting process. According to Jennings (2005), ritual chichas were thinner than typical household chichas.

In particular, the production of a higher-quality alcohol drink implies more steps or processes, such as germinating starch (maling), cooking, sieving, and fermenting. Hayashida (2008) states that modern Andean chicha brewers obtain high-quality chicha by sieving the wort (caldo) many times. The sieved material can be ground again and reintroduced to the fermenting solution, increasing the final product’s quality. Germinating, cooking, and sieving techniques (e.g., with cloths) will reduce the amount of residual mash and the fermenting (starch) material. These production processes could explain the minimal starch presence in the concho residue. The data therefore suggest a careful preparation of chicha.

We also need to consider that fermented chicha has a short shelf life (days to a couple of weeks, depending on the preparation); it must therefore be consumed shortly after preparation (Hayashida, 2008). As Zori and Urbina (2014: 212) stated, “no fewer than four important Inca routes converge in or near Tarapacá Viejo” and one of them probably...
connected the valley to the coast, including the Cerro Esmeralda site and the Huantajaya silver mine about 6.5km east of Iquique (see also Berenguer, 2009). Thus, this high quality chicha could have been prepared in an important nearby economic center, such as Tarapacá Viejo, about 80km northeast of Iquique. However, the Epithemia diatom found in the Cerro Esmeralda vessel residues is present in shallow lakes with high electric conductivity (an indicator of salinity) and coastal rivers in continental aquatic ecosystems, while sponges are general indicators of marine and continental aquatic environments (Figures 3f, I; Tapia, 2008). Ferns and Schinus sp. macro-remains (MRI 0112) indicate the presence of important levels of humidity; the first are common in channels and lomas and the second in riversides. Thus, with respect to the quality of the water used to make the Cerro Esmeralda chicha, the types of phytoliths along with the diatoms indicate both fresh and brackish water, or at least water with high salinity. The quality of water used in the chicha preparation correlates well with the environmental conditions of northern Chile’s coast. Cerro Esmeralda corresponds to the coastal mountain range that falls steeply over the Pacific Ocean; therefore, the chicha of Cerro Esmeralda was probably prepared locally.

The use of plants other than maize is interesting and puzzling. Phaseolus is a genus that includes native edible species of the region’s coastal valleys such as Phaseolus lunatus (lima beans) and Phaseolus vulgaris (beans). One possible explanation for the presence of Phaseolus starch is that cooked beans were added to aid in the fermentation process. Beans must be eaten cooked; otherwise, they may cause stomachaches and cyanide poisoning (Rodhouse et al., 1990). This requires further investigation as to whether the beans were used to improve fermentation or as nutritional complements during the Inca Horizon. Evidence of remains of both plants has been found in local archaeological funerary contexts, and have an important nutritional and symbolic relationship (Horta, 2013; Arriaza et al., 2015).

Cucurbita/Lagenaria is another edible plant found in the starch concho sediments (MRI 0102 and MRI 0107). Its distribution ranges from Mexico to Bolivia (Ugent and Ochoa, 2006). It was also found in Incan queros vessels from northern Chile (Arriaza et al., 2015). The presence of Cucurbita/Lagenaria in both vessels could be due to chicha preparation and serving techniques. Often gourd bowls were used as jug dippers for sipping and serving. Starch grains might detach from the gourds, ending up in the
chicha drink. The possible presence of Manihot starch (Figures 2a-f) in the brushing sediment of the aríbalos (MRI 0010) is another example of an unexpected plant in this type of vessel. These plants (Phaseolus sp., Cucurbita and Manihot) are not described in colonial documents as a component used to make chicha for Inca state libations (Molina, 1943; Guaman Poma, 1980; Cobo, 1990; Betanzos, 1996; Sarmiento de Gamboa, 2007).

However, they were found along with maize in quero vessels in northern Chile as part of libation paraphernalia (Arriaza et al., 2015). The Zea mays, Phaseolus sp. and Cucurbita/Lagenaria sp. were also among the staple foods of ancient Andean agricultural populations in northern Chile (Érèves, 1975; Muñoz, 1989, 2004; Pardo and Pizarro, 2005; Garcia and Santoro, 2014; Arriaza et al., 2015).

Thus, another explanation is that during the Cerro Esmeralda ritual, people drank chicha with different types of flour, which today is known as pihuelo or chupilca (Pardo and Pizarro, 2005). This mixed drink also complements food.

Another possibility is that several plants found in Cerro Esmeralda burials could be related to funeral rituals called comer con el muerto (eating with the dead), whereby the assistants or mourners offer food and chicha to the inhumations. Finally, in addition to local processes to make chicha, the presence of these plants in Cerro Esmeralda burials could be related to local ritual, nutritional, and agricultural behaviors from northern Chile populations. In addition, they could be related to quero vessels, which were part of libation paraphernalia, besides the aríbalos in northern Chile (Arriaza et al., 2015).

The same idea related to local ritual, nutritional, and agricultural behaviors is possibly correlated with the chuspa bag (MRI 0113). Checura (1977) stated that a chuspa bag recovered from the Cerro Esmeralda Capacocha contained coca leaves and ashes (Llipta) and that a globular vessel contained Schinus molle and Prosopis beans. Our macro-analysis supports Checura’s (1977) assessments of the presence of seeds and fruit of Schinus sp. but no evidence of Prosopis beans was found in the analyzed samples. Pardo and Pizarro (2005) debated that Schinus sp. and Prosopis were also used to make honey and chicha during pre-Columbian times in northern Chile. Despite the extensive use of chicha made with S. molle in the Andes, this fermented beverage is not mentioned in colonial Spanish documents for Inca state libations. Accordingly, the presence of S. molle in a chuspa bag from Cerro Esmeralda points to a different and potential (local?) raw material to make chicha.

The microanalysis sample of the chuspa bag revealed six genera of phytoliths, which suggest the presence and use of several different plants for their rituals (Figures 3, 4). Some of the plants could have been edible because elongated dicotyledonous phytoliths come from Phaseolus, Cucurbita, Schinus sp. (seeds to flavor food), and Acacia (seeds used as medicinal aid). The Cypselaceae family also has edible parts. In addition, the presence of seven morphotypes in the aríbalos compact sediment sample (MRI 0102) corresponds to taxa belonging to the monocotyledonous group, which includes Zea mays and the Poaceae family morphotypes: Bambusoideae, Festucoideae, Panicoideae, and Pooideae (Figures 3, 4). Festucoïd and Panicoïd phytoliths indicate the presence of grasses, while the presence of graminoids is not only an indicator of taxa, but also of specific environments with considerable water availability. Elongated dicotyledonous morphotypes indicate the presence of herbs and shrubs. Thus, the numbers of plants identified in the chuspa bag are similar to those found in the aríbalos. Supposedly, both objects should have only one type of plant residue (coca leaves and corn beer, respectively), but this was not the case.

It is possible that parts of these results are related to pollution. It is possible that the archaeological materials have been contaminated when they were buried in ancient times, when they were excavated and/or when they were studied. However, our results are consistent across all types of analyses conducted with both micro-and macro botanical residues. The macro-botanical contents of the bag have shown micro-botanical consistent results, while compact aríbalos residues (conchos) were sampled from inside, where information is encapsulated. Also, other archaeological objects of the Azapa Valley in northern Chile used in libation, such as queros, have shown similar results (Arriaza et al., 2015).

This suggests transverse rituals occurred in funeral behavior, placing local agricultural products as offerings. These products (corn, beans, molle, etc.) are found in chuspa vessels and chuspa bags, perhaps as part of Collasusu funeral practices. In brief, all these plants found in Cerro Esmeralda grave goods may have more important local funerary ritual values than the obvious nutritional and fermenting properties.

**Final Comments**

The presence of the starch grains and phytoliths suggests the preparation of high quality chicha (albeit using low-quality local water) in Cerro Esmeralda under the Inca state. We expected that chicha vessels would contain only one type of vegetal product (maize) but, contrary to expectations, we found several species of plants in the residues. There are at least four possible scenarios that could explain the existence of various species of plants in the vessels (aríbalos) of Cerro Esmeralda. First, the chicha was prepared mainly with maize but was complemented with other plants such as Phaseolus, Cucurbita, and Manihot flour (pihuelo). Another possibility is that the vessels contain flour of different products as part of the mortuary ritual of feasting with the dead (comer con el muerto). The third explanation is that the pot containers (ol-lias) used to prepare the wort (caldos) were not exclusively utilized to make chicha but were also used for multiple cooking purposes, thus contaminating the operative fermenting chain and the final chicha product. This last proposition needs further investigation in the archaeological and ethnographic records. Finally, it is also possible that a combination of these propositions, along with symbolic and ritual behavior, could explain the presence of different types of starch grains. The synergy of these possible scenarios could be the essence of rituals at the Cerro Esmeralda burial.

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