

ARTICLE

Beyond the Trenches: Rethinking Archaeological Labor through Ritual, Relational, and Community Archaeologies in the Central Andean Highlands

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Abstract

Archaeological labor in the Andes unfolds not only in field trenches and labs but also in the social and cosmological landscapes where sites remain powerful actors affecting daily community life. Drawing on collaborative fieldwork in the Huaylas and Cosma River Basins of the Cordillera Negra Mountains, Ancash, Peru, this article reflects on how archaeological work is shaped by theoretical framing, traditional field methods, and the relationships between descendant communities and the archaeological sites they live around that influence daily fieldwork. We argue for an expanded definition of archaeological labor that encompasses ceremonial, emotional, and relational work alongside excavation and analysis and share strategies in hiring, organization, and training. These include daily routines that make space for ritual practice, decision-making frameworks that treat local knowledge as actionable, and project planning that honors contractual and cultural obligations. By including these community-framed practices in the methodology, we call for culturally engaged archaeological labor that recognizes how communities, researchers, and sites co-produce knowledge and working conditions, thereby building a safer, more inclusive, and more equitable work environment.

Resumen

El trabajo arqueológico en los Andes se desarrolla no solo en las trincheras de excavación y los laboratorios, sino también en los paisajes sociales y cosmológicos donde los sitios siguen siendo actores poderosos que influyen en la vida cotidiana de las comunidades. A partir de trabajo de campo colaborativo en las cuencas de Huaylas y Cosma, en la Cordillera Negra, Áncash, Perú, este artículo reflexiona sobre cómo el labor arqueológico está moldeado por marcos teóricos, métodos tradicionales de campo y las relaciones entre las comunidades descendientes y los sitios arqueológicos que habitan, las cuales configuran el trabajo diario en campo. Sostenemos una definición ampliada del trabajo arqueológico que abarque el trabajo ceremonial, emocional y relacional junto con la excavación y el análisis, compartiendo estrategias en la contratación, organización y capacitación. Estas incluyen rutinas diarias que abren espacio para la práctica ritual; marcos de toma de decisiones que consideran el conocimiento local como accionable; y una planificación de proyectos que respeta las obligaciones contractuales y culturales. Al incorporar estas prácticas definidas por la comunidad en la metodología, abogamos por una labor arqueológica culturalmente comprometida que reconoce cómo las comunidades, los investigadores y los sitios co-producen conocimiento y condiciones de trabajo, construyendo un entorno laboral más seguro, inclusivo y equitativo.

Keywords: archaeological labor; Andean Highlands; community archaeology; traditional knowledge

Palabras clave: trabajo arqueológico; Sierra Andina; arqueología comunitaria; conocimiento tradicional

Traditionally, archaeological labor refers to the physical and intellectual work associated with excavation methods, analysis, recording, and interpretation carried out by all members of the project team, including directors, students, specialists, and locally hired workers. Over the past few decades, scholars have expanded this definition to include the technical expertise and traditional knowledge provided by local excavators and community partners (Cline 2023; Leighton 2016; McCall and Álvarez Larrain 2019; Mickel 2019, 2021; Novillo Verdugo and Palacios Tamayo 2024; Prieto-Olavarria et al. 2025), the gendered and racialized dynamics of fieldwork (Acebo et al. 2025; Flewellen et al. 2021; Leighton 2020; Voss 2021), and the institutional environments that influence worker safety and well-being (Bradford and Crema 2022; Emerson 2021; Mamani 2025). Indigenous scholars and community knowledge holders have pushed this conversation further by demanding more collaborative, community-based approaches that center local and Indigenous knowledge systems, relational accountability, and the co-production of archaeological knowledge (Angelbeck and Grier 2014; Atalay 2012; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2010; Gnecco and Ayala 2016). By foregrounding community relationships with archaeological places as living entities, contested places, and active memorials, this article builds on this previous work with a focus on the Andean Highlands, highlighting archaeological sites not as passive locations of work but as historically situated and socially embedded actors that influence how labor is organized, experienced, and understood.

Archaeological sites in this region are extended expressions of social, ritual, and cosmological life. These relationships emerge from long-standing ontologies that view places as animate, powerful, and deeply relational (Altamirano Enciso and Arguedas Altamirano 2015; Bray 2015; Cadena 2015; Lozada and Tantaleán 2019; Salomon 2018; Sillar 2009, 2018). Community members who partner with archaeological projects carry the knowledge of ceremonies, dreams or visions, and local histories or protective practices into archaeological labor, which shape how a site should be approached and treated (Acuto and Corimayo 2018; Lane and Herrera 2005). We argue that these traditions do not sit outside archaeological work but rather inform its pace, direction, and meaning, as well as the daily emotional climate. Drawing on long-term collaborations in the Huaylas and the Cosma River Basins in the Cordillera Negra Mountains, Ancash, Peru, we present two case studies that show how communities and *huacas* actively shape hiring practices, daily scheduling, and excavation protocols through community-based knowledge systems to facilitate safe and respectful practice and create dynamic relationships with the archaeological sites themselves. By proposing a framework for archaeological labor that centers relational, ceremonial, and cosmological work both with descendant communities and nonhuman entities alike, we contribute to current conversations about archaeological labor by showing how communities and sites shape both the production of archaeological knowledge and the conditions under which labor takes place.

Andean Ontologies

The Central Andes encompass many languages, histories, and ecological zones where people experience and describe their worlds in dynamic ways. The terms used throughout this article reflect what we observed in Huaylas and Cosma, along with documented ethnographic and ethnohistoric works across the region (Bolin 1998; Bray 2015; Cadena 2015; Gose 2018; Isbell 1985; Skar 1993; Smith 1989): they draw on concepts from Andean ontologies to understand how communities relate to archaeological sites, landscapes, and the beings who inhabit them. We acknowledge that these concepts do not represent a singular or homogeneous “Andean worldview.” Yet, even though community members in Huaylas and Cosma did not always use these specific Quechua terms in daily conversations, their practices, stories, and relationships with the sites reflect principles consistent with the ideas described later in the article. These concepts are included as tools for interpretation and recognizing the forms of relational labor that guide archaeological work in these communities.

Reciprocity, often described through the Quechua term *ayni*, plays a central role in shaping relationships among human and other-than-human actors. *Ayni* involves exchanges of labor, care, or energy that create bonds of obligation and mutual support, sustaining balance among people, landscape, and the broader cosmos (Allen 1988, 2019; Altamirano Enciso and Bueno Mendoza 2011). These exchanges

occur not only between families during agricultural work but also extend to mountains, springs, stones, and the *huacas* that protect, affect, and sustain communities.

Camay is a vital animating force present in people, places, objects, and elements of the natural world (Bray 2009, 2012; Lozada and Tantaleán 2019): it refers to the life energy that beings exchange and sustain through ongoing relationships. Ceremonies, offerings, and acts of care nourish *camay*, strengthening connections among humans, nonhumans, and the landscape. Recognizing *camay* encourages us to treat ritual, emotional, and intellectual labor as essential components of safe and respectful archaeological work, rather than as practices external to scientific activity.

Huacas (*wakas*) form a third key concept. They include mountains, springs, large stones, rivers, or monuments that hold *camay*, agency, and social presence (Allen 2024; Altamirano Enciso and Arguedas Altamirano 2015; Bray 2012; Dean 2010). Here, *huacas* refer specifically to large ceremonial platform mounds. When descendant communities guide excavations, share stories, or recommend ritual protections, *huacas* are treated as active collaborators in the labor process. These forms of guidance require archaeologists to listen, adapt work schedules, and follow relational protocols that shape the pace and nature of fieldwork.

Despachos, or ritualized offerings, are one of various ways that communities can interact with and acknowledge the *camay* of *huacas*. They are often conducted before engaging in any activity that would disturb *pachamama* (Mother Earth), throughout the field season when significant events occur, and always as a “closing ritual.” Each region has slightly differing customs—sometimes exotics or personal items are also offered for a special petition—but typically the intention is to ask for permission or protection out of reciprocal respect or as a thank you. Together, reciprocity, *camay*, *ayni*, and the *huacas* form the conceptual foundation for this article, illuminating how these relational processes shape archaeological work on the ground.

Region: Cordillera Negra

Our case studies, Huaylas and Cosma, are situated in highland river valleys located in the Cordillera Negra (Figure 1), a dry mountain range in the Ancash region of north-central Peru. The eastern slopes form the western boundary of the Callejón de Huaylas and run parallel to the glacier-peaked mountain range of the Cordillera Blanca. From these eastern valleys of the Cordillera Negra, the snowcapped summits remain prominent and visible, shaping an important part of the environmental landscape of the communities living there. The western slopes of the Cordillera Negra descend toward the Pacific Coast, and although the snow-capped peaks of the Cordillera Blanca are not visible from the basins, the jagged peaks of the Cordillera Negra extend up to elevations of 5,200 m asl, so that stark highland landscapes contrast with views of cloudy lomas and the Pacific Coast, creating a transitional zone that links highland and lowland communities.

The environment is semiarid, shaped by seasonal rainfall and dry intermontane valleys with various microclimates, rainfed lakes, archaeological sites, and agricultural fields that are managed by highland communities dispersed throughout the region. These ecological conditions activate ongoing relationships between community members and their powerful and animate worlds. Within this setting, the work of *huacas*, mountains, lakes, and other features influences how communities, like those in Huaylas and Cosma, organize labor, interpret risk, and show care and responsibility to their environments. In the following sections, we highlight the specific ways in which each archaeological team in Huaylas and Cosma approached and negotiated these relationships at each site.

Working with Huacas

Huaylas

The archaeological site of Chupacoto is in the town of Huaylas, which is on the eastern slopes of the Callejón de Huaylas in the Cordillera Negra. The valley is home to roughly 1,500 to 1,600 occupants, who live in the town of Huaylas and in the neighboring district of Santo Toribio (this town separated from the district of Huaylas in the 1990s to establish its own municipal authority). Chupacoto is a large

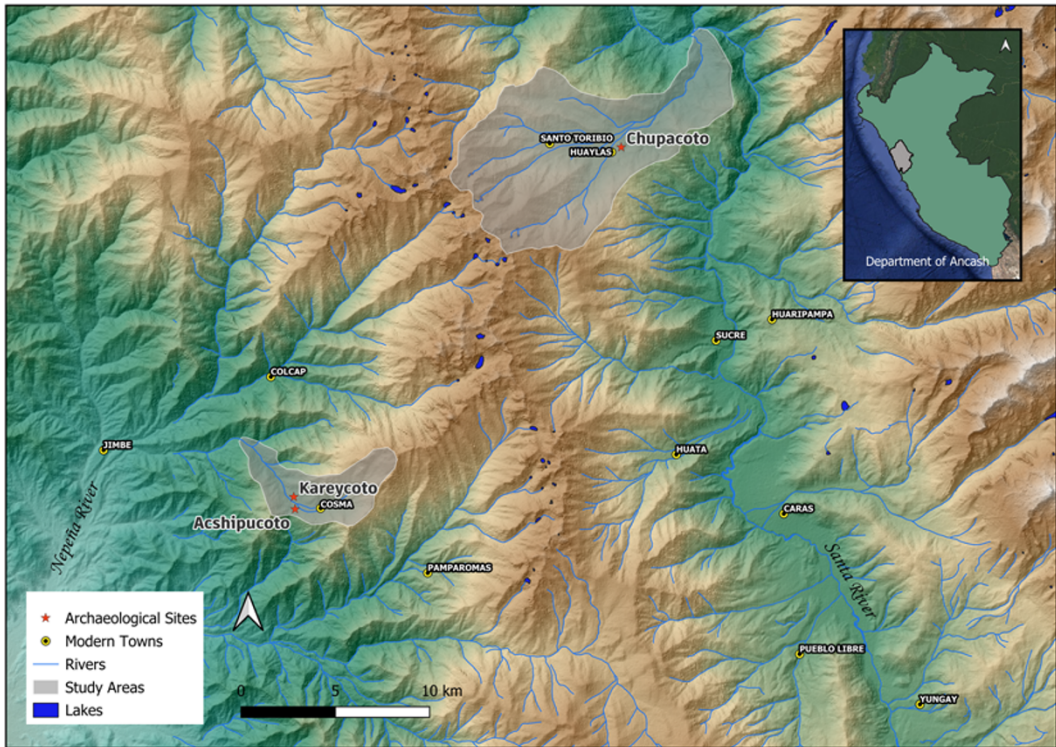


Figure 1. Location of archaeological sites and communities mentioned throughout the article. Map by ABM; 30 m SRTM DEM from NASA Earth Data; geographical shapefiles from Instituto Geológico Minero y Metalúrgico.

mound that was built more than 5,000 years ago on top of a natural rock formation (Brock 2024). It derives its name from the Quechua words *chupa* (tail) and *qotu* (mound) that describe the form of Chupacoto, which consists of a main platformed mound with two smaller mounds extending to the west to form the shape of a tail.

During the early twentieth century, Chupacoto had not yet been formally designated as an archaeological site by the Peruvian Ministry of Culture. Instead, the mound and a flat area to the south were privately owned and were used as agricultural fields, a home for the land caretakers, and corral space for animals. On the small mound of Chupacoto was the home of another family that has since been abandoned but continues to be a powerful place within community lore. According to community members, there is a tunnel beneath the house that extends deep into the mound where encounters take place with the devil or with pale white women who beckon visitors inward. In other areas of the mound, others recall the appearance of a midnight bull whose bell rings in the night to signal the location of hidden gold or apparitions along the eastern slopes. These lived experiences and their retelling across generation are active parts of how the Huaylas community relates to Chupacoto and are a way to assert the *huaca*'s power and vitality.

In 1970, a 7.9 earthquake devastated the district of Ancash and caused widespread destruction throughout the Callejón de Huaylas. Approximately 70,000 people were killed, and 20,000 were displaced (Carey 2010; Oliver Smith 1986). In the aftermath, the Peruvian government built temporary shelters for residents, including on top of the archaeological site of Chupacoto. In Huaylas, many who settled directly on Chupacoto built their homes along the site's southern plaza and mound slopes (Figure 2). During a period of reconstruction led by the municipality and foreign NGOs, residents of Huaylas also began repurposing stones from Chupacoto to use as construction materials for their homes, the town's streets, and the foundation for the chapel. Through resettlement and rebuilding, Chupacoto became a place of refuge, survival, and reconstruction. Although some residents of Chupacoto later moved back

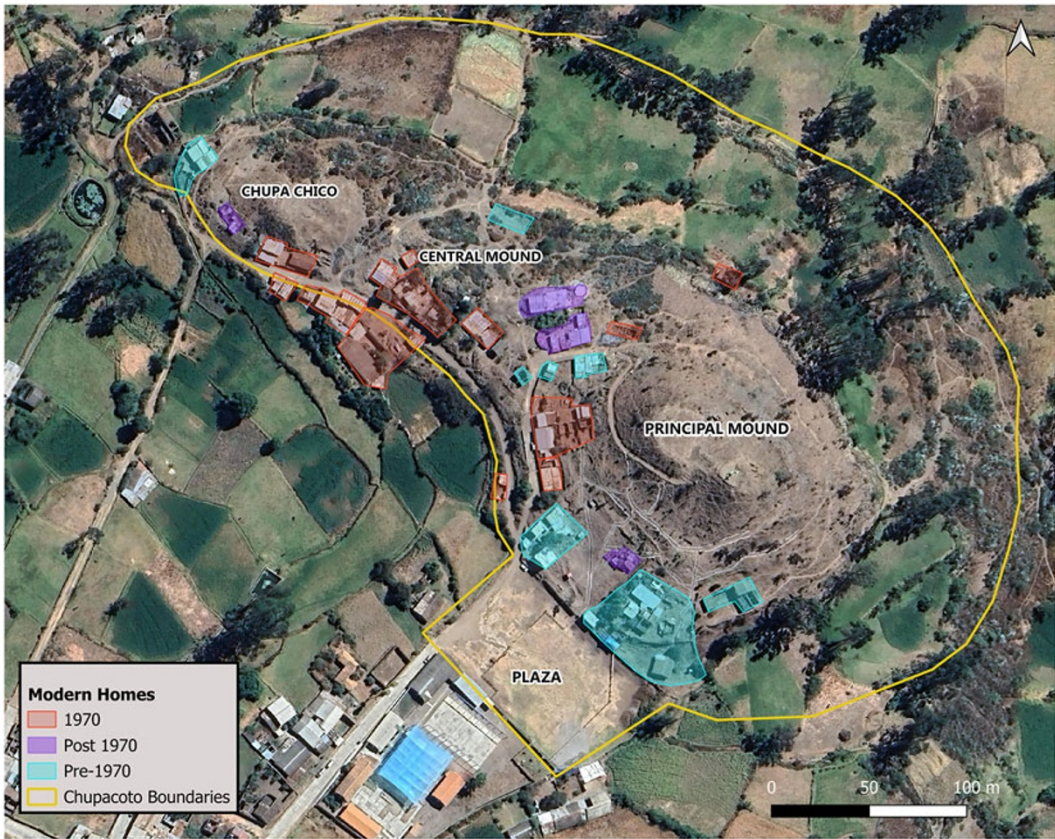


Figure 2. Map of Chupacoto showing the location of modern homes on the *huaca* that were built before the 1970 earthquake, after the earthquake in 1970, and much later. Map by ABM; base map: Google Satellite.

into the town, others remained and live on the site today, once again reshaping community relationships with the *huaca*.

Research at Chupacoto began in 2022 through a project that documented community relationships, daily life, memories, and ceremonial practices at the site. Working with community members, the team recorded narratives and stories and mapped them onto the archaeological landscape.¹ In 2023, the Kawsay Pacha Archaeological Project (KP) carried out formal excavations that confirmed multiple periods of occupation, between the Late Preceramic (3500–2500 BC), through the Late Intermediate period (AD 1000–1470), and into the present through post-earthquake settlement. The narratives presented here draw from the 2022 community story mapping and the 2023 excavations, which together shaped our interpretation of the site and guided the design of reciprocal labor practices.

Labor Networks and Navigation in Huaylas

From its inception, the KP project aimed to function as a community-collaborative effort grounded in relationships established since 2022. Before fieldwork began in 2023, the team met with municipal and community leadership to outline research plans and discuss community participation. At the time, various community members were employed as part of a municipal heritage project, clearing vegetation at Chupacoto and other archaeological sites in Huaylas. Our recruitment strategy adjusted to word-of-mouth recommendations and referrals from municipal officials, and we committed to hiring one individual per household to distribute project income more equitably across community families.

The KP project also prioritized diversifying resources by having nonlocal team members stay at a local hotel operated by one family, purchasing tools locally, hiring local tradespeople to build and maintain equipment, and arranging meals through multiple households. These efforts were part of a broader



Figure 3. Knowledge exchange workshop in Huaylas that was organized during the 2023 field season. Photo by Amanda Brock Morales.

strategy to integrate the project into the local economy, ensuring that multiple households benefited from its presence.²

In addition to more formal forms of labor, traditional knowledge, storytelling, and organizing with community experts were also essential labor practices that shaped how people understood and engaged with Chupacoto. Going beyond the story mapping conducted in 2022, these practices included meeting with leaders of a former local heritage group that organized artifact recovery, advocated for the protection of Chupacoto, and worked toward the creation of a community museum. We also organized knowledge-sharing workshops in 2023 in which municipal leaders, residents, historians, educators, and students gathered to discuss community relationships with Chupacoto, preliminary archaeological findings, and the future direction of project research (Figure 3).³

During excavation, work schedules were set together with community team members to align the field day with their agropastoral lifestyle. Working Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. gave community members time to tend their animals and fields in the evenings and on weekends. The ceremonial calendar also shaped excavation plans. In the week leading up to the festival of Mama Shawi held each year on July 8, families prepare for the arrival of hundreds of visitors to Huaylas. Many reoccupy their familial homes on top of Chupacoto that are otherwise abandoned throughout the year, whereas others walk across the site to reaffirm their ties to the place. Because the festival requires extensive community participation and transforms the site into a place of visitation and celebration, we halted excavations and instead engaged in both lab work and relationship-building activities (such as festival participation) for the entire week so that local team members could fulfill their other obligations.

Similarly, during the celebration of the patron saint María de la Asunción in August, the southern plaza of Chupacoto became an arena for the community bullfight, with the mound rising prominently as both a witness and participant in the ritual event (Figure 4). To honor the expectations surrounding



Figure 4. During celebrations for the patron saint of Huaylas, Maria de la Asunción, Chupacoto stands as a witness and participant in the activities. Drone photo by Amanda Brock Morales.

the *huaca*'s role in the festival, excavations needed to be planned accordingly; we finished our work in the plaza first before moving to other parts of the site.

During project planning, hiring, and scheduling, Chupacoto revealed its presence in more subtle ways. Community members spoke about the *huaca* through memories of the 1970 earthquake, stories of rebuilding, and the site's ongoing role as a center for cultural activities and Huaylino identity. Once excavations began, Chupacoto's agency as a *huaca* became more direct. As is customary at many Andean sites, the team and participating students asked Chupacoto for permission to work by offering a *despacho* of coca leaves, fruits, small candies, and locally produced wine placed in a crevice of the mound. During excavation, community team members would often *chacchar*, or chew coca, especially when reaching deeper contexts or encountering bones. At times, team members stepped aside to *caminar con la huaca* ("walk with the site"), which was a process where they would meditate, smoke an unfiltered cigarette ("Nacional" Brand), and chew coca to renew communication with Chupacoto. These actions affirmed continued permission for work and ensured personal safety. Ignoring this process meant risking *que el sitio te jala*: falling sick with a serious illness or even death.

Sharing dreams each day also became an important part of the labor process. For some, Chupacoto appeared in dreams as an elderly woman or, less frequently, as an elderly man or the mound itself. On one occasion, a student dreamed that artifacts flowed from an excavation unit, revealing an entrance into the mound where an elderly woman beckoned a white woman inside (Figure 5). The team interpreted this dream as a good sign that Chupacoto welcomed the project and accepted the work. In this way, dreams represented a direct form of communication between the site and the project.

Dreams, however, were not always positive, and sharing them created a collective space for safety and decision-making among team members. These conversations encouraged the group to reflect on their emotional readiness for the day, to assess risk, and to decide when individuals needed to take extra care, change work locations, or *caminar con la huaca*. These dreams served to understand not only team members' sense of personal protection but also the project's standing with the *huaca*.

At the close of excavations, the team shared a final *despacho* with Chupacoto to give thanks for what the *huaca* had revealed through the work. The project also extended this gratitude outward to the Huaylas community through a site tour, allowing residents to visit, ask questions, and share final

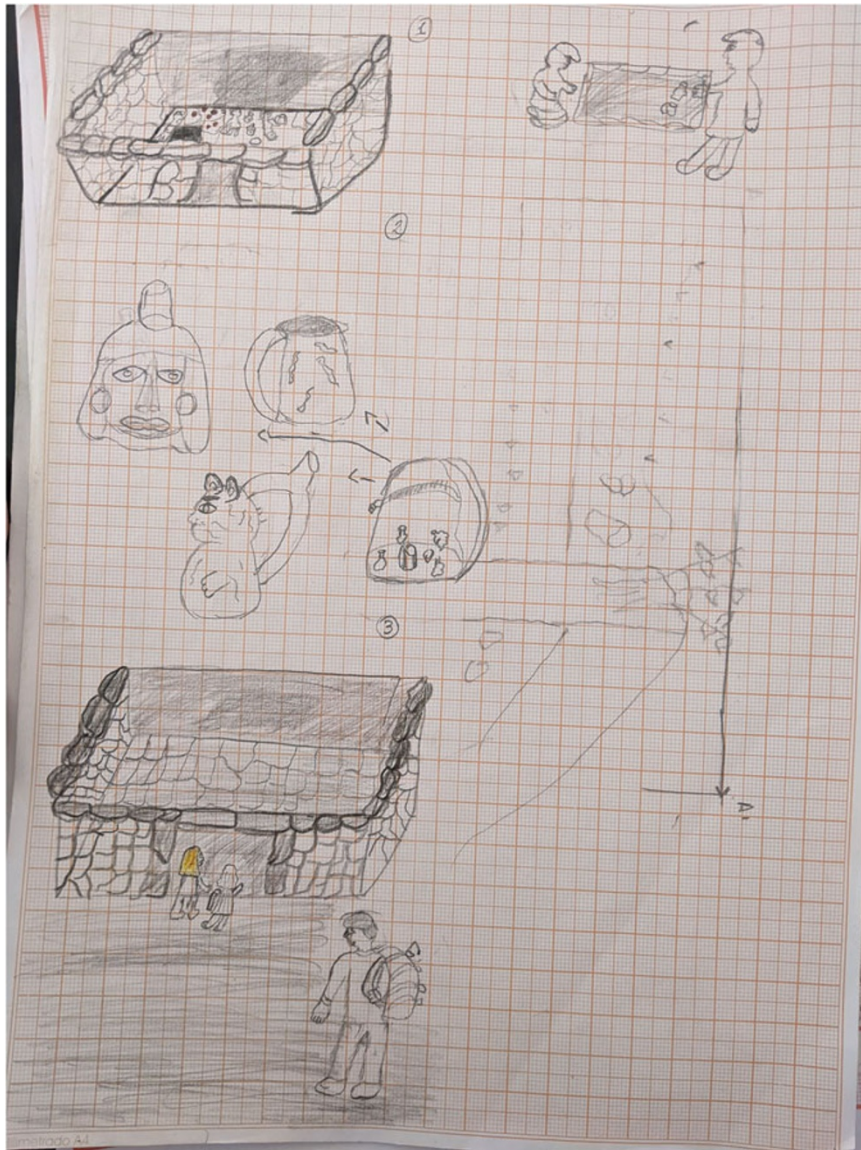


Figure 5. A student participant drew his dream and shared it with team members for interpretation. Drawing by Juan Diego Bernuy.

reflections (Figure 6). Together, these acts of thanksgiving reaffirmed reciprocal relationships between the project, *huaca*, and community.

Cosma (Santa Province)

The Cosma Complex is a large multicomponent center located on the western flank of the Cordillera Negra mountains at the headwaters of the Nepeña River Valley. Extending over 250 ha, the site center comprises two large *huacas*, prehistoric terraces, a hilltop fortress, Inca carved stone works, and tombs and *huanca* (sacred) stones embedded throughout the landscape (Figure 7). Both *huacas* are within a 15-minute walk from the local communities of Cosma and Collique, which, combined, are a *caserío* of 80 agropastoralists.



Figure 6. Site tour held by the Kawsay Pacha Archaeological team at the end of the excavation field season. Photo by Amanda Brock Morales.

The Proyecto de Investigación Arqueológica Distrito de Cáceres del Perú (PIADCA) project was established in 2014. After more than a decade of field research, excavations revealed that Cosma was established during the Andean Late Preceramic but had several peak-use periods throughout its 5,000-year history (Munro 2018; Navarro-Vega and Munro 2017, 2018, 2019). The earliest dates (2900–2400 BC) were collected from within several of the nine Late Preceramic temple rooms that were within the two large pyramid mounds, known locally as Acshipucoto and Kareycoto (Munro 2018; Figure 8).

Acshipu refers to “concentric” or the “central place,” and *coto* in Quechua means mound or a “communal place of gathering”—an intriguing name considering the circular temple structure uncovered within it that dates the complex to longer than five millennia ago (Figure 9). *Karey* translates to “the Gift” in the regional Quechua dialect and is considered by the local community to be a feminine *huaca* with her own agency, power, and influence for the local people and surrounding region. Constructed in a step-platform design, she reached almost her full height of 18 m during the Late Preceramic. Acshipucoto, the smaller of the two mounds measures 10 m in height and is a 10-minute walk (or 500 m) from her larger sibling. They are aligned on a north–south access, although separated by the Cosma ravine/river.

Cosma is a historically significant community that was uniquely sovereign for centuries (Figure 10). Although the other towns and villages in the region continued to be controlled by the Jimbe Hacienda lower down in the valley, the people of Cosma obtained ownership of their own lands by 1714 and regulated their own public works and community through centuries-old kinship bonds. These bonds are still heavily integrated into community life, especially through the custom known as small-town leadership or the *faena* system, which integrates communal labor ties led by elected “pedestrian mayors.” In Cosma, the *faenas* run small civic projects, such as painting the school, repairing the bridge, or digging irrigation canals (Thurner 1997:91): at least one man from each household contributes his time and labor to these projects, and one woman from each household helps with communal meal prep and serving.



Figure 7. Oblique image of the Cosma basin showcasing the relationship between the landscape, mounds, and the town center. Photo taken from the western ridgeline, facing the east. Photo by Kimberly Munro.

Faenas also function at the smaller family scale, providing extended labor for building and repairing houses, harvesting crops, and other activities. In 2014, our first field season, we found it difficult to hire local workers. We ended up organizing a community meeting and a *faena* with the help of the president, helping us get our foot in the door; after that, we were able to organize several days of labor to clear vegetation from the mounds and build relationships with men in the village who wanted to work. Traditionally, the “*faena mayor*,” or the leader of each project, is responsible for providing a large communal meal, which is held on-site and involves musicians and dancing throughout the day. Using the *faena* system was one of the fastest and easiest ways to mobilize individuals, clear the mound quickly, and reinforce relationships with the community as a whole.

Cosma’s early sovereignty, separating it from the established hacienda system, empowered the native inhabitants of the area to maintain ownership of their own lands during the colonial era. This could also be attributed to the influence and protective agency of these early *huacas* and the landscape. This is significant when considering traditional community organization, kin, and labor practices tied to these locales.

Labor Networks and Navigation in Cosma

Because of Cosma’s small size, an official meeting with all community members is called by the town president before the start of each field season where the project team discusses excavation plans, timeline, and weekly workdays; this meeting is held in the gazebo of the central plaza. The amount of annual funding determines the crew size (averaging 10–12), which can mean rotating out crew every four to five days to ensure that at least one male from each family in the community is in the weekly rotation. Although women are also full voting community members and have always had the option to work on



Figure 8. The mounds of Acshipucoto (foreground) and Kareycoto (background) aligned south to north, photo taken facing toward the northwest in the Cosma basin. Photo by Kimberly Munro.

the site, none have volunteered, considering archaeology not to be “women’s work.” After a day or two on rotation, some community members choose to opt out of excavating. Over the years, a core group of team members has been established. These established team members are paired with new members of the crew to ensure that proper excavation methods are being followed.

The field day and week are organized around agropastoral labor practices to ensure each project member can attend to their own livestock and fields. Even though team members are paid for full workdays, the field day starts at 8:00 a.m. and ends at 1:00 p.m., allowing time for workers to complete their own early morning tasks and to spend a full afternoon in their fields each day. Additionally, we vote as a team on holidays, local and national, that the crew want to observe.

Cosma is a traditional “Comunidad Campesina,” a community recognized by the state as a self-governing unit that has rights over their territories and a shared identity. As mentioned, when our team started excavations at the site in 2014, it was difficult to hire workers to help with the large task of mound clearing. Through meetings with the community president and other respected elders, a *faena* was organized. Anyone who works for the day gets fed (and often takes food home for their families). Although traditional labor networks such as the *faena* can be understood as physical expressions of *ayni* in action, the complex history of colonialism, the introduction of Catholicism, and the development of religious syncretism interwoven into the sacred prehistoric landscapes also influenced everyday labor organization and planning. This was often done by including religious deities and metaphysical or elemental spirits into daily conversations. Even though Catholicism is the dominant religion for most descendant communities in the region, in Cosma it is often practiced through deeply rooted syncretic traditions shaped by reciprocal relationships with ancestors, mountains, springs, *huacas*, and other nonhuman beings. In this blended landscape of belief, the oral histories, legends, *fantasmos* (ghosts or spirits), and



Figure 9. Ritual chamber inside the Acshipucoto Mound. Photo by Kimberly Munro.



Figure 10. The Cosma plaza/town center with church, facing the south. Photo by Kimberly Munro.



Figure 11. Despacho offerings for Kareycoto at the start of the field season. Photo by Kimberly Munro.

lores are tied to specific landscape features, archaeological sites, and significant spiritual entities, both existing within the Catholic and animistic cosmological spheres.

For example, the respect and reverence paid to the patron saint of San Lorenzo are on par with how the *huaca* of Kareycoto is referenced in conversation as a protective and stern grandparent, who is associated with strange “supernatural” happenings within the basin and can bless and “castigar” (punish or cause illness). Oral histories, lores, and supernatural events that have been shared with project members over a decade of work in the Cosma basin are usually anchored to specific places and archaeological vestiges, including, although not exclusively, the large mound of Kareycoto.

Illness, especially that occurring after a day in the field, digging, or long hikes to sacred places (springs, lagoons, mountain peaks, or shrines), is often caused by *mal aire* (“bad air”) that a person can encounter through *huacas*, touching pottery or artifacts, or from the presence of unseen entities. As protection, team members carried *ruda*, or a piece of the rue plant, in their pockets, and community members regularly insisted on egg cleansings or flower baths to ensure project members’ safety and that of the community. The daily act of *coqueando* was also a form of daily communication with the *huacas* and ancestors: crew members continued to ask daily for permission and protection from any negative energies they might encounter during excavation.

Before the onset of fieldwork each season, the team conducted a traditional *despacho* on the mound to ask permission to excavate (Figure 11). In Cosma, the direction of cigarette smoke, the appearance of a hummingbird or a hawk, or a gentle breeze during or shortly after a *despacho* may signal the *huacas*, pachamama’s, ancestors’, and local *apus*’ (mountain deities) acceptance of the offering and granting permission.

Although the crew was always reverent to the mound and ancestors throughout the years of excavation and would comment on what the mound wanted or felt by them digging there, the



Figure 12. Early morning *coquando* with members of the field crew, before starting work. Photo by Kimberly Munro.

dynamic somewhat shifted in 2023 when the team exposed the underground gallery system beneath the Late Preceramic architecture. This event caused many of the stories associated with ancient tunnels, *demonios*, *duendes*, and serpents—previously told tongue in cheek—to become stories of warning. The level of spiritual care practiced by the crew intensified. The first 15 minutes of every field day was spent *coqueando*—or connecting with the coca leaf and tobacco in silence for several minutes—before discussing dreams and odd happenings that had occurred since the previous workday (Figure 12).

Caminar con la huaca, as described earlier for Huaylas, appears to be practiced the same way in Cosma, although it is known by the different colloquial term of *coquear*. The time spent *coqueando* was an important morning meet-and-greet with each other and the *huaca*; it was also the time to inform how crew members should be placed in specific units, including who should avoid going into the gallery for that day. Evangelical crew members were affected most by dreams, because they did not *coquear* and could not properly protect themselves accordingly. Additional *despachos* (repeated when a significant find or burial occurred), morning dream talks, *coqueando* with the mound, and regular *limpias* (ceremonial cleansings) consistently reaffirmed communication and connection between the crew and Kareycoto to guide the daily organization of the team members spatially within the units.

As in Huaylas, the patron saint festival in honor of San Lorenzo in Cosma is one of the biggest events of the year, held between August 8 and 12. Every year we coordinated our field season around the festival. Hundreds of people from around Peru return to Cosma in the days leading up to the festivities, redirecting labor toward festival preparations. The grand finale is the *corrida*, or bullfight, and many of the men go on wild bull-capturing expeditions (*chucaro*) deep into the mountains in the weeks leading up to the *corrida* to ensure they have enough bulls for the event. Whereas the bullfight in Huaylas takes place near Chupacoto, Cosma's *corrida* takes place in the colonial plaza in town. During this event, the Spanish influence on the community is foregrounded, drawing attention away from Kareycoto as a central and powerful community focal point (Figure 13). Both mounds are regarded as Indigenous ancestral spaces, distinctly separated from the Catholic elements of the festival.



Figure 13. The Cosma plaza toward the end of a *corrida* (bullrun). Photo taken from the church belltower, facing toward the north. Kareycoto can be seen in the background. Photo by Kimberly Munro.

Discussion

In both Cosma and Huaylas, everyday interactions between the community members, mounds, ancestral spirits, and spaces on the landscape were informed by ongoing discussions with local and Indigenous crew members. These interactions took many forms in a long, shifting, and fluid process that included descendant communities, their traditional knowledge, and deeply ingrained and nuanced relationships with their living landscapes (Figure 14).

Although archaeological places in Andean contexts are experienced as animate persons, this may not be the case cross-culturally. Yet, what we emphasize here is that the physical place where archaeological labor and excavation take place matters, and local values and traditions reverential to them should be consulted in all stages of project planning, development, and execution (Figure 15). Archaeological contexts are not bounded neutral backdrops, and even sites that are not considered as living beings carry power through their histories, meanings, community memories, and connections to people and past events (Beaulieu 2025; Supernant 2022).

Building on scholarship that recognizes the power of archaeological sites as meaningful and active elements within present-day landscapes, our Andean case studies demonstrate two ways that choices surrounding labor can be applied to archaeological work in other contexts: (1) by incorporating community rhythms into how labor is organized and (2) by recognizing the emotional, ritual, and spiritual dimensions of archaeological work.

Incorporating Community Rhythms

In Huaylas and Cosma, the project team, daily schedules, and organization of research timelines were structured around community agricultural cycles, caregiving responsibilities, local festivals, and



Figure 14. Archaeological vestiges/landmarks that are significant to community members, oral histories, and stories that make up and frame the Cosma Basin. Figures by Kimberly Munro.

economic commitments (Figure 16). This approach is rooted in the increased call to action by archaeologists to collaborate and recognize local and descendant knowledge through labor contributions by our community partners (Atalay 2012, 2019, 2020; BigWolf Thompson 2024; Bria and Carranza 2015; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2010; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Douglass et al. 2019; Nicholas and Markey 2014; Van Alst and Gover 2024). Bayfield (2022) describes this work as creating a shared “activity timespace” where collaborators take the time to align agendas, share knowledge, synchronize rhythms, and continually negotiate roles through an ongoing collaborative process. These rhythms did not occur immediately but were born out of long conversations and multiple intentional meetings with community collaborators and local authorities. This meant spending extended periods of time, year after year, with communities and their respective *huacas* to witness the local understandings between people and their dynamic landscapes and to build meaningful relationships of respect and care with our community partners.

More importantly, the act of incorporating community rhythms was not viewed as a logistical challenge *separate from* the archaeological work but was brought into project planning as a *part of* and central to the success of the projects. When applying for funding and organizing fieldwork activities, we budgeted time and resources for relationship-building activities, such as attending ceremonies, hosting community meetings and forums, and documenting local oral histories, to help guide labor decisions: these activities become an essential part of the archaeological work alongside archaeological survey, excavations, and lab analysis. The goal of these projects was never only to collect archaeological data but also to develop sustained relationships and co-create knowledge with community collaborators.



Figure 15. Nati, a Cosmeño, milking her cow in a communal field, with Kareycoto in the background; A black excavation shade tent can be seen on Kareycoto's mound top. Photo taken facing slightly northwest. Photo by Kimberly Munro.

Recognizing the Ritual and Emotional Dimensions of Archaeological Labor

The Andean Mountains are deeply ingrained in Andean cosmology and sacrality. For the majority of Indigenous or Quechua speakers in the highlands, Catholicism is the central religion. However, many still practice a syncretic form blended with ancestral practices and animistic beliefs often shaped by reciprocal relationships with and between family and community members, ancestors, mountains, springs, local deities, *huacas* and other transcendental spirits, or nonhuman actors, which cannot be separated.

Archaeological labor in Cosma and Huaylas was structured around these ongoing relationships between the archaeologists, local communities, and these sentient actors in the process. Labor began with asking permission from the *huacas* through *despachos* and offerings, which were not symbolic acts but instead the opening acts of labor. Daily practices, such as chewing coca, not only functioned as physical support but also as a means of communication, protection, and emotional connection between workers, ancestors, and the landscape (Allen 1988; Brescia Seminario 2024; Stolberg 2011). Additional protective measures, such as the use of *ruda* and *limpias* and carrying talismans, reinforced practices that prioritized care for both the body and the spirit of the community team members. Finally, dream sharing not only served as a form of communication between community members, the *huacas*, and archaeologists but was also treated as a legitimate form of knowledge that communicated local understandings of the landscape (Lane and Herrera 2005; Mannheim 1987; Swancutt 2024). Dream sharing also provided an opportunity for the team to check in with each other daily, gauge emotional responses to the archaeological work, and make labor decisions that took these emotions into account (Figure 17). These interactions were not always discrete events or formalized choices but emerged out of a dynamic process of paying attention, making mistakes, learning to listen, having sincere conversations, and

INCORPORATING COMMUNITY RHYTHMS

STRATEGY	IMPLEMENTATION	PURPOSE
Equity Distribution of Labor	Hiring different families for food, housing, and other skilled labor	Spreads economic resources across multiple households
Community Meetings	Workshops, local forums, small-scale meetings with local leaders or specific stakeholders	Space for multi-vocal decision-making, reciprocal knowledge exchange, and intergenerational education
Traditional Labor Practices	<i>Faena</i> and <i>ayni</i> -based work; Pay attention to kinship networks and household labor management strategies	Builds reciprocal relationships between the project, community, and the site for site preparation and maintenance
Timelines / Seasonal Festivals	Decide schedules directly with the team. Coordinate around major seasonal festivals	Aligns schedules with community lifestyle and allows them to fulfill social and ceremonial obligations

Figure 16. Labor strategies according to local and traditional knowledge in Huaylas and Cosma.

recognizing community needs (Henderson and Laracuenta 2019; Kretzler and Gonzalez 2023; Schmidt and Kehoe 2019) as archaeological excavations and research unfolded.

Although not all archaeological sites worldwide are considered persons, many are places that carry community histories and memories, as well as stories of violence or trauma, or they are literal places of rest for Indigenous ancestors and descendant communities. Historically, archaeology has contributed to feelings of mistrust and violence that include and extend beyond the Andes because of extracting archaeological information, displacing communities in the name of heritage protection, and separating the value of archaeological places from present-day realities. For example, for Black and Indigenous communities in the United States, many archaeological sites are tied to histories of enslavement and structural violence. In many parts of the world, archaeological interpretations of place can also be political and contested (Arnold 1999; Bender 1993; Bender, ed. 1993; Wilson 2019), so that even collaborative work can generate tension, disagreement between stakeholders, and strong emotional responses to archaeological research (Supernant 2025). More recently, archaeologists have been called on to confront this legacy by asking what it means to give back to communities long engaged through unequal and extractive research relationships in archaeology and how we can support and empower descendant communities through collaboration efforts that contribute to processes of “repair, reconciliation, and restitution” instead of extraction (Acebo et al. 2025). This article emphasizes that recognizing the spiritual, emotional, and ceremonial power of a place is not only important for interpretation and research but must also be incorporated into the labor process as a central part of engaging with archaeological sites as meaningful places beyond archaeological value and by building relationships of care with the communities that welcome us and their sacred places.

Collaborative archaeology as both a relational and healing process is particularly relevant, because archaeology has the capacity to reconnect people with their histories, ancestors, and landscapes while also strengthening community networks and mental health through collective support (Salerno et al. 2023; Schaepe et al. 2017). In practice, doing this kind of archaeology must be intentional. It can involve discussing difficult or contested histories of a place with collaborators before conducting investigations

RITUAL AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL LABOR

PRACTICE	IMPLEMENTATION	PURPOSE
Opening Ceremony	A <i>despacho</i> or offering consisting of coca leaves, candies, fruits, alcohol, and flowers	Establishes permission and protection and creates a reciprocal obligation with <i>huacas</i>
Coquear or caminar con la huaca	Chewing coca leaves, smoking a filter-free cigarette [Nacional brand], meditating	Connect daily with the local landscape; reaffirm respect, reverence, and site access. Personal safety and protection
Dream Consultation	Share, discuss, and interpret dreams at the start of each workday	A personal and collective way to communicate with the site. Guides labor distribution, spatial safety, and project legitimacy
Other Protection Practices	Carry <i>ruda</i> plants, personal talisman, or fetishes. <i>Limpías</i> (flowers, eggs, Florida water, smoke)	Wards off evil and ensures safety and health from <i>mal aire</i> or spiritual/physical illness or bad luck
Stories and Legends	Informal conversations, interviews, community workshops/meetings	Provides context for the archaeological sites, their power, historical framework, and community landscape relationships
Site Closure	Can include another <i>despacho</i> , site tours, shared team meals	Acts of thanksgiving to ensure reciprocal obligations between the project, community and the site are met

Figure 17. Ritual dimensions of archaeological labor in Huaylas and Cosma.

or working with them to document memories and stories of place throughout the entirety of a project. It might also look like a daily check-in with local team members to share how the work is affecting them personally and adjusting activities accordingly. Some community members might need moments of prayer, ceremony, or short storytelling breaks that can be organized during the workday or over shared team meals to acknowledge any tense histories, the ancestors, or the significance of the place. Importantly, although these moments may indeed offer insight for archaeological research, their purpose is not to produce data but instead to foster care and connection between the entire team and the landscapes with which we engage.

Conclusion

This article has provided two archaeological case studies from neighboring regions of the Andean Highlands, sharing similarities and differences of modern-day archaeological labor practices when multiple ontologies and voices are considered through all phases of project planning and execution. At Chupacoto and in Cosma, labor extended beyond excavation to include ritual practice, dreams, protective rites and negotiation, celebration of festivities, and stewardship. These practices demanded flexibility, active engagement, listening, and working alongside local/descendant communities, their local landscapes, and the *huacas* to guide how, when, and where work could proceed. These cases also demonstrate how archaeological labor is not just about producing data but is also about working to sustain meaningful relationships between the project, community, and archaeological sites and to safeguard the well-being of everyone involved.

We argue that archaeological labor does not begin and end with excavation and analysis but includes the ongoing work of building relationships with the communities and engaging landscapes as meaningful places instead of neutral objects of study (Hoffmann 2020; Surface-Evans 2020). They are powerful places embedded in long-standing relationships between people, memories, and emotional histories;

recognizing this requires integrating these relationships into how projects are organized, planned, and how team members (local and nonlocal) engage with the landscapes where they work. In this way archaeological labor not only becomes a means of producing knowledge but also a practice grounded in respect, accountability, and care.

By centering these relationships between local communities and the physical place where work takes place, we call for current and future generations of archaeologists to consider how archaeological labor extends beyond trenches and traditional archaeological methods through these ritual, relational, and community archaeological approaches.

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Notes

1. These stories were mapped alongside community members using the Qfield phone application. Information on this methodology is being published in a separate article.

2. It is important to note that in Huaylas and Cosma, not everyone could benefit from the economic resources brought in by the archaeological projects, nor was everyone always happy about how these resources were distributed. However, the community meetings, consultations with local leaders, and radical transparency about project resources were key strategies in working to alleviate some of these tensions.
3. Interviews, oral history documentation, Qfield story mapping, and knowledge sharing workshops conducted by the Kawsay Pacha Archaeological Project in 2022 and 2023 were classified as exempt through IRB202102576.

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