



## Project Gallery

# A pre-Hispanic religious landscape on the arid Andean altiplano of Bolivia

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Research carried out in the Carangas region of highland Bolivia has identified a surprising concentration of pre-Hispanic religious sites, which are linked both to ancient Andean cults of *wak'a* (sacred mountains, tutelary hills and mummified ancestors) and to the Incan settlement of the region. Of these sites, one ceremonial centre stands out for its unprecedented characteristics for the Andes.

Keywords: Andean Altiplano, Inca, pre-Hispanic sacred landscape, ceremonial centre

## Introduction

Recent archaeological studies conducted in Carangas ([Figure 1](#)), a region of the central-southern Andean Altiplano characterised by its extremely arid and cold climate, have revealed many pre-Hispanic religious sites and structures that form a dense ritual landscape. In particular, we identified a noteworthy set of 135 sites located on hilltops, most of which are directly associated with ancient agricultural production areas (Cruz & Joffre 2020). These can be identified on the ground and in satellite images by their variable number of concentric walls (between two and nine per site), each of which occupies a different level of terrace around the hilltop ([Figure 2](#)).

Abundant quantities of pre-Hispanic ceramic fragments are found at all sites. These are mostly of local styles typical of the Late Intermediate and Late Periods (AD 1250–1600) (Villanueva Criales 2015), along with some regional styles linked to the southern expansion of the Incas. Most of the ceramic fragments correspond to bowls, plates and small jars, indicating their use in commensal and ritual practices (Bray 2003). Although these religious sites possess some of the same defensive characteristics as the pre-Hispanic occupation sites known as *pukaras*, we found no significant evidence that these were residential. These ceremonial spaces emerged during the Late Intermediate Period, like the *pukaras*, and were later appropriated and resignified by the Incas. The characteristics of these ceremonial spaces correspond with the information provided about *wak'as* and their shrines (Mannheim & Salas Carreño 2015) by Spanish clerics and chroniclers of the Colonial Period (AD 1535–1800), such as the famous Guaman Poma de Ayala (1980 [1615]). The concentration of religious spaces in this region of the Altiplano may be explained by the belief that the tutelary divinities could

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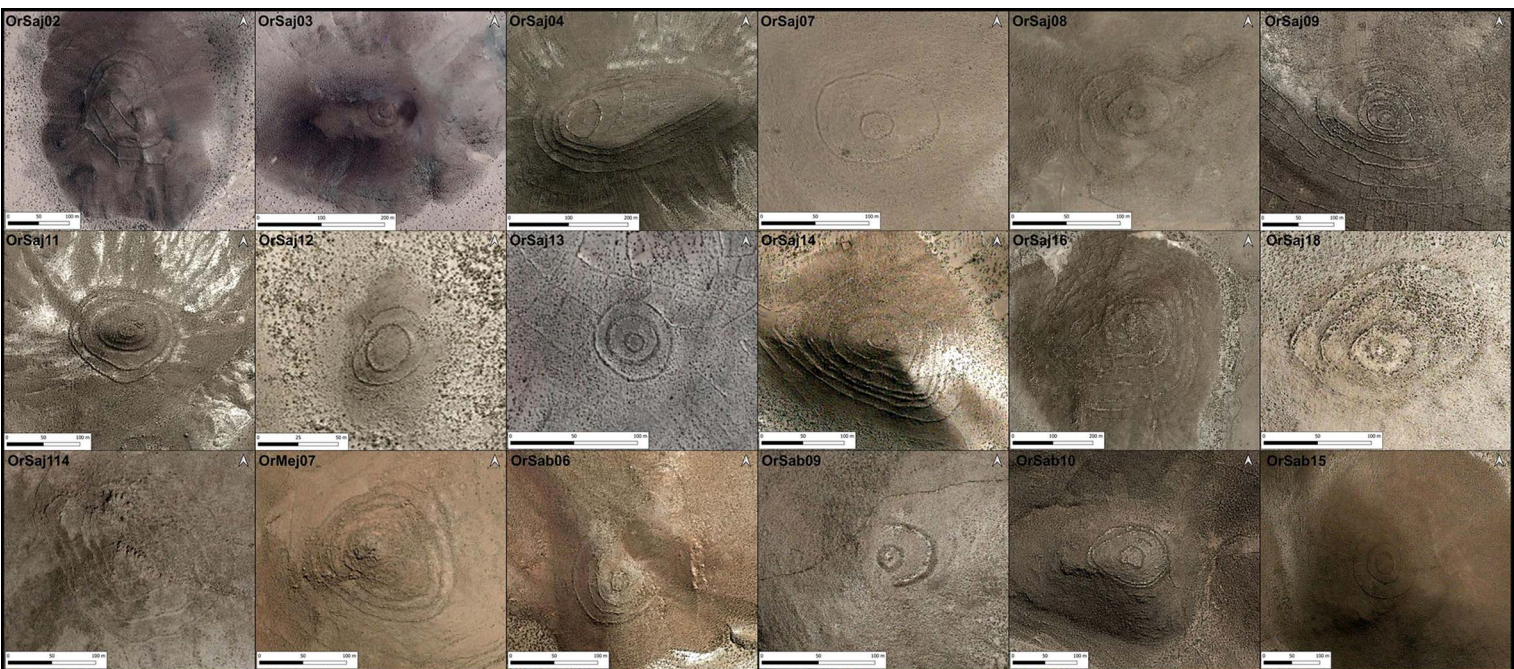
Figure 1. Map showing the location of the Carangas region in Bolivia (credits: P. Cruz; map from *Global Multi-Resolution Topography*).

regulate the already extreme climatic conditions, since a small variation in temperature or rainfall could cause the loss of all crops or the death of livestock.

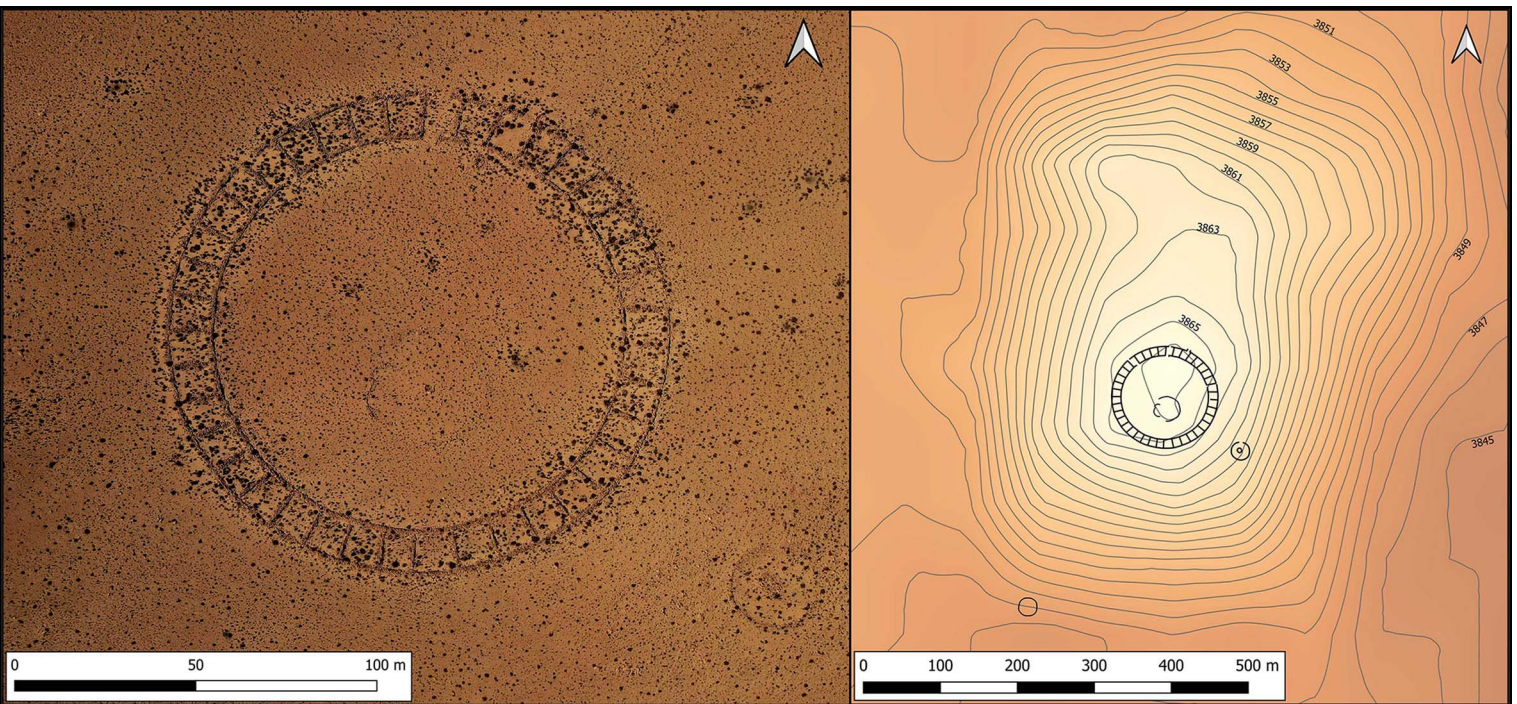
In addition to these concentric-walled sites, we identified a completely different site, Waskiri, near the Lauca River and the Bolivian-Chilean border. It is an impressive circular construction, located on a small hill, which surprises both in its large dimensions (140m in diameter) and its design and regularity (Figure 3). The site has a perimeter ring comprising 39 adjoining enclosures, each with a surface area between 106 and 144m<sup>2</sup>. These enclose a plaza of approximately 1ha, which is scattered with abundant ceramic fragments ascribed to the Late Intermediate and Late Periods—similar to those observed in the hilltop concentric-circle sites. We found no structures or material remains that could be ascribed to either earlier or more recent periods. Two other circular constructions, 24m and 23m in diameter, are located respectively 40m and 255m outside the main site.

## A ceremonial centre with unknown characteristics in the Andes

The pre-Hispanic ceremonial centre of Waskiri is not only a surprising discovery in this sparsely populated desert region of the Andes, but also exhibits characteristics that are unprecedented in the pre-Hispanic Andes. It is likely, however, that the first reference to the site is



*Figure 2. Photographs of the walled concentric sites in the Rio Lauca area of Carangas (credits: P. Cruz; from GoogleEarth images).*



*Figure 3. Photograph and site plan of Waskiri (credit: P. Cruz).*

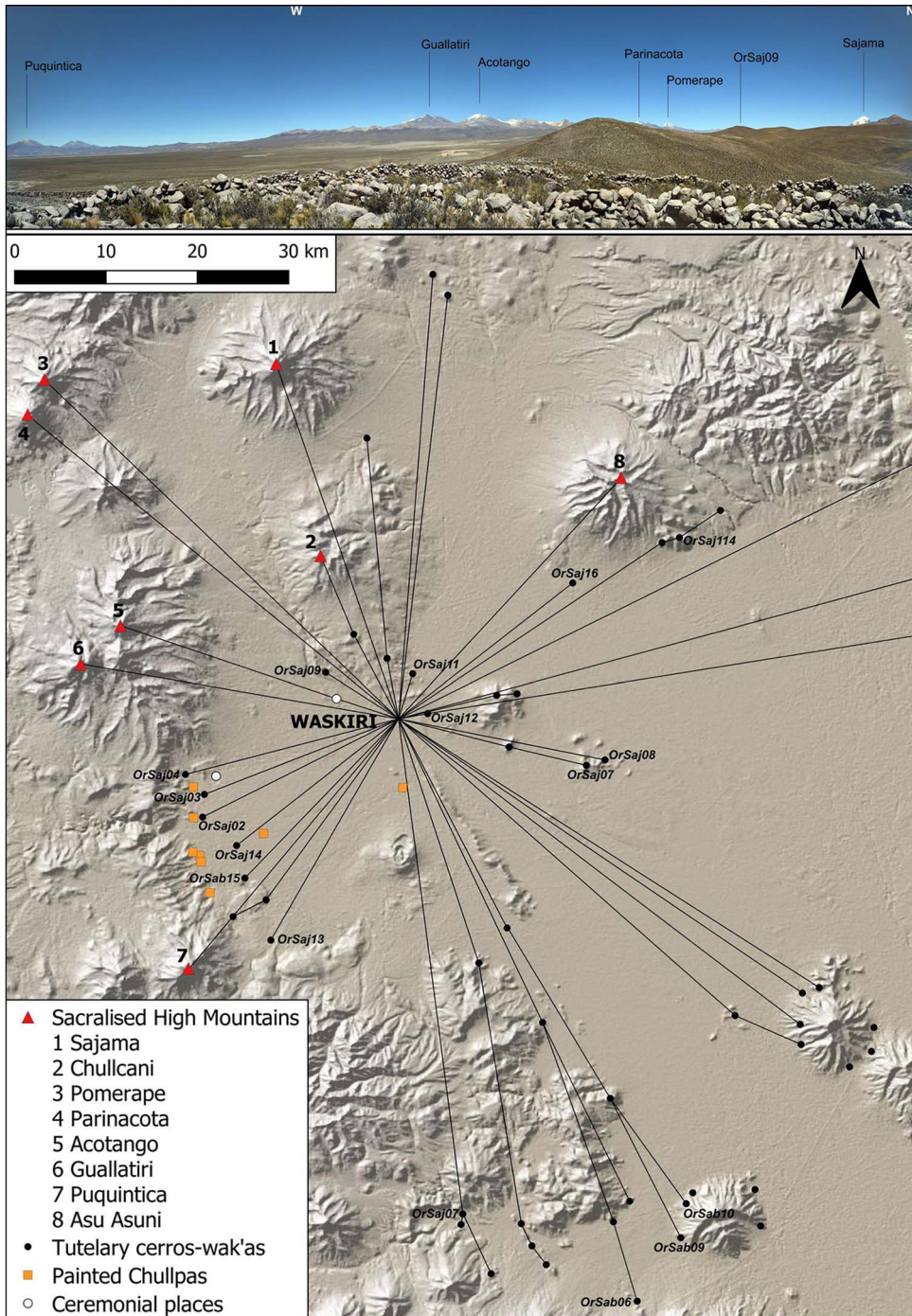


Figure 4. Top) view from Waskiri, showing the silhouettes of the main sacred mountains of the region; bottom) distribution of sacred sites around Waskiri (credits: P. Cruz).



Figure 5. Funerary towers of the Rio Lauca (credit: P. Cruz).

found in the chronicle of the evangelising priest Bartolomé Álvarez (1998 [1588]: 111), who travelled through the Carangas region during the 1580s. Álvarez received information about the existence of a ‘large circular building’, in which the main Indigenous authorities of the region, *curacas* and *caciques*, met to perform ceremonies for the Sun during the month of June—the Inti Raymi, one of the most important annual Incan ceremonies also described by Guaman Poma (1980 [1615]: 175)—as well as for other religious celebrations, including animal sacrifices. The religious and political importance of these celebrations and sites was highlighted in the words of Álvarez (1998 [1588]: 111) when he described the attendees as entering a kind of “solemn drunkenness” in these highly particular buildings that he considered to be the “house and business of hell”.

Various aspects of the site are particularly relevant in relation to Alvarez’s information. First, the design of the site, housing 39 perimeter enclosures distributed around a large central plaza, is consistent with the congregation of authorities and their retinues from different localities. Also, the location of Waskiri in a desert area, separate from any pre-Hispanic settlement or agricultural sector, may have factored into its use as a regional ceremonial centre, located in a neutral or common space. Regardless, Waskiri is centrally located within the religious cartography of the region, connected visually and spatially with the principal sacred mountains, numerous walled concentric sites, funerary towers ornamented with designs that replicate Inca textiles (Gisbert 1994), and other geo-symbolic markers (Figures 4 & 5). In this sense, the radial design of the site and its linkage with the main religious landmarks of the region—all considered to be wak’as—mirrors the Incan *ceque* system, the paths that

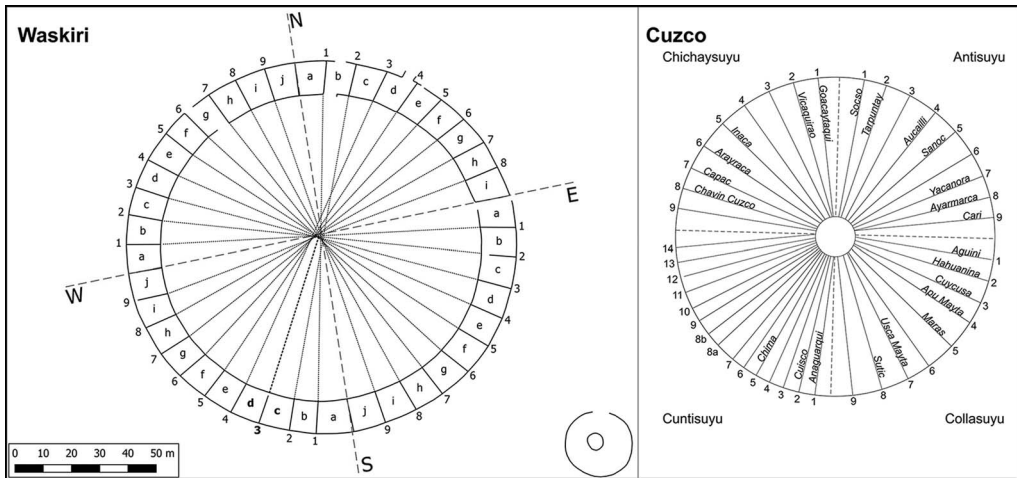


Figure 6. Comparison between the Waskiri site structure and the Cuzco ceque system (based on Bauer 1992; credit: Pablo Cruz).

ordered the sacred geography in Cuzco, the capital of their empire (Zuidema 1964). In fact, the radial walls that delimit the 39 enclosures around the perimeter of Waskiri reflect a structure that is very much akin to that of the Incan ceque of Cuzco. By arranging these according to the cardinal axes, four quadrants composed respectively by 9-9-9-8 walls or lines are observable, which is similar to the quadrants of the Cuzco system that is integrated by 9-9-9-14 ritual paths (Bauer 1992) (Figure 6). The intentionality of this arrangement is clearly expressed in wall 3 that delimits enclosures c and d of the south-west quadrant of Waskiri, which, unlike the other 34 walls, does not have a corresponding wall on the opposite side of the site. If the divisor walls of Waskiri did indeed represent a ceque system, this would be more explicit evidence that the Incas replicated the symbolic structure of Cuzco in the regions they colonised.

## Conclusion

This ceremonial centre and the ritual landscape in which Waskiri is situated provides rich material for further study of the pre-Hispanic history of this part of the Andes—an area that has been generally understudied. Further research will allow investigators to test these initial hypotheses and interpretations.

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