

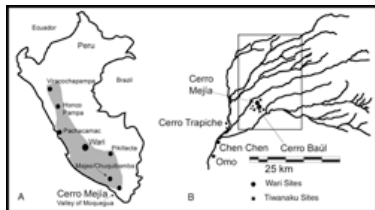
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December 4, 2009

**Digging at Peru's Cerro Mejía**

by Donna Nash

*A small Wari settlement with a big imperial surprise*

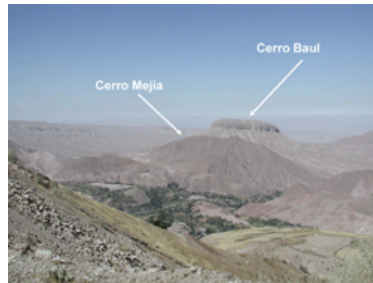
A. Major Wari sites and regions. B. Important Wari sites in the upper Moquegua Valley. (Donna Nash)

The Wari Empire controlled nearly 800 miles of the rugged Andes mountains from A.D. 600 to 1000. The impetus behind their expansion and the factors leading to their collapse remain a mystery. The largest civilization before the Inca, Wari tactics of expansion, government, and political institutions are often compared to Spanish accounts of the Inca. The Wari are described as a militaristic state that conquered many groups, built roads to facilitate travel, and managed their far-flung territories through a combination of local lords and heartland bureaucrats living in state built installations. In fact this early Andean empire was first recognized by the distinctive architecture of its state installations.

Cerro Mejía is located very near one such installation—**Cerro Baúl**. Both sites are in the department of Moquegua and the valley of Torata, approximately 8,000 feet above sea level. Cerro Baúl and other Wari state installations have been examined by archaeologists to understand Wari expansion, government, economy, religion, etc., but no one had looked at the smaller communities, and we had no idea what daily life was like during Wari times. Research at Cerro Mejía is the first glimpse at common people, but it has also given archaeologists a new view of the Wari state and its power.

Cerro Mejía is a dome shaped hill located in the Andean foothills of southern Peru. The site was settled by colonists entering the region around A.D. 600 and part of a massive effort of the ancient Wari Empire to remodel the landscape and irrigate land that had never been watered for agriculture. The Wari were master engineers and transformed the physical landscape to grow more food than ever before by building flights of terraces to prevent soil erosion and a canal system conveying water more than 13 miles through rugged terrain. Perhaps even more amazing is the distance of this colony from the Wari capital—it is located more than 300 miles away. How did Wari rulers keep in touch with this distant colony? We don't know exactly but somehow they did!

The Wari Empire controlled nearly 800

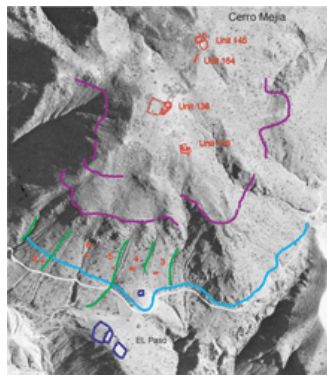


Looking down at the Torata Valley, an upper tributary of the Moquegua river, one can see Cerro Baúl and Cerro Mejía as well as their location relative to the river and today's irrigated agriculture. The Wari system was much bigger and more productive. (Donna Nash)



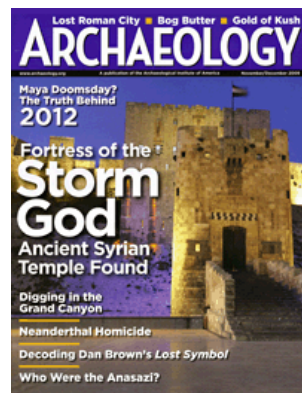
Both of these fragments are from a typical ceramic vessel type called a face neck jar that was adopted and used by many peoples in the Wari Empire. On the left (A) is an example from Cerro Baúl, on the right (B) is from Cerro Mejía. Both show an ear and other facial features but were made in different styles. (Donna Nash/Cerro Mejía Project)

In 2008 our research team was anxious to get started. We planned to excavate several houses at Cerro Mejía. Our goal was to understand daily life in a Wari settlement and to determine if the settlers were from the local area or the Wari heartland. Work at the village of Cerro Mejía in 1999 and 2000 and the nearby monumental Wari installation of Cerro Baúl in 2001, 2002, 2004, and 2007 had shown that the two groups of people lived very different lives. State personnel on Cerro Baúl had large well-decorated homes, used fine pottery, some of which was decorated with religious motifs, feasted on quality cuts of llama meat and ocean fish (the coast is about 60 miles away), and likely had servants to assist with common domestic tasks. People living on Cerro Mejía were diverse in the style and size of their homes, the types and quality of their household pottery, and did not enjoy the same rich diet as those living on Cerro Baúl. Household items between the two sites were so different we suspected that people living on Cerro Baúl were from the Wari heartland in Ayacucho but that the people on Cerro Mejía were from somewhere else. Previous excavations gave us few clues and so we hoped to find new evidence to understand these differences.



This labeled aerial photo of Cerro Mejía shows the summit and its boundary walls (purple), the slopes and its division into neighborhoods by large walls (green), and the Wari canal (light blue). The prominent white line is a colonial road used before the modern road's construction in the 1960s. Excavation units labeled in red are from 1999 and 2000. (Donna Nash)

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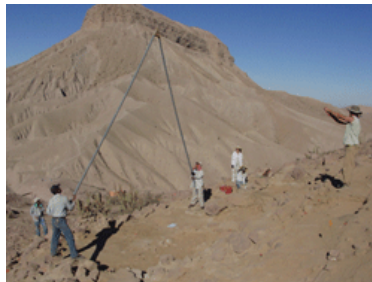


Neighborhoods on the southern slope of Cerro Mejía.  
(Donna Nash)

Cerro Mejía is more than two square miles in area. Large buildings, many of them houses, are scattered across the summit, which is ringed with boundary walls. The southern slope, facing Cerro Baúl, is divided by large walls into several neighborhoods and each neighborhood has eight to 15 houses built on terraces. The lower portion of Mejía's southern slope was used to grow crops, these fields were watered by a canal, which also supplied the settlement with potable water since it is located away from the river.

In 2008, we excavated two houses in one of the neighborhoods on Mejía's southern slope. These two houses could not have been more different. We labeled the house located low on the hill near the canal--unit 17 and the house located higher on the slope--unit 18.

Unit 17 was built with a rustic masonry style with a mixture of rounded and rectilinear rooms. The yellowish mortar contained little clay. Thus the surviving walls were low and fragile. Unit 17 was remodeled several times--in the latest phase before the house's abandonment there were two houses attached to one another and sharing a common wall. The larger house located to the east has a large patio, roughly semi-circular in shape and a small square room with a cooking hearth and an attached storage room. A ramp led from the patio to an elevated terrace surface, which was eroded and poorly preserved. The small house located to the west also had a patio, which was somewhat rectilinear, and a small square room, also with a storage room attached. In the larger, eastern house we found evidence of pottery production--clumps of clay with small fingerprints--likely those of a woman. In the eastern house under the ramp we also found a tomb.



Project members work together to take an overhead photo of the larger patio in Unit 17. Note Cerro Baúl in the background. (Cerro Mejía Project)



This stone plaque, or *placa pintada*, was found above the tomb opening in the interred room of Unit 17. The stone is local to Cerro Mejía but the tradition of making these types of grave offerings is not. These types of offerings are found 125 miles to the north in the Majes and Chuquibamba regions. (Cerro Mejía Project)

The burial was placed in a room the floor of which was subsequently covered with small rocks and sealed with plaster. Since the rocks had empty spaces between them the plaster floor eventually cracked, which is why it was so poorly preserved. Under the eroded surface but above the mouth of the tomb we found a humble but significant artifact, a *placa pintada*. Placas pintadas are rocks or thick ceramic plaques painted with designs. These objects are typically associated with graves and in some areas where preservation conditions are right they are found with offerings bundled around them. These offerings are typically organic materials and so do not preserve in the area of Cerro Mejía. Importantly, placas pintadas were used by people of the Majes and Chuquibamba regions, which is located approximately 125 miles north of Cerro Mejía. The *placa pintada* found with the tomb in unit 17 was made from a rectangular stone of the type outcropping on Cerro Mejía and was painted with two yellow stripes with a red stripe in between (the red stripe is faded and difficult to see).

The *placa pintada* indicates that at least some of the settlers on Cerro Mejía were from the Majes/Chuquibamba region because no such burial treatment has ever been reported from local Huaracane cemeteries or house burials.



A large stone interred in a chamber under the foundation wall of Unit 17 may be the representation of a supernatural being or an ancestor. (Cerro Mejía Project)



Peruvian archaeologist and project co-director Monika Barrionuevo poses as she thinks the individual was placed in the tomb. (Cerro Mejía Project)

In addition, excavations around the foundation of the old buried room where we found the tomb revealed evidence of religious worship. Located just under the

foundation of its southern wall, there was a stone chamber. Inside this chamber was a large stone, viewed in profile it resembles a feline, perhaps a puma. This stone is clearly not part of a wall but rather is an interred ritual object, perhaps a fictive ancestor or supernatural patron. This chamber was sealed and likely corresponds to the original construction of the house. No similar type of sculpture has been found locally, and again this appears to be a ritual foreign to Moquegua locals and unknown in the Wari heartland.

There are many Wari sites and materials in the Majes/Chuquibamba region and so it is possible that the people who built and lived in Unit 17 were settlers forcibly moved by the Wari Empire from their homeland 125 miles away to Moquegua. It is also possible that the Wari developed Moquegua as a colony for settlers seeking access to land or opportunities in a new region. Future research will be needed to understand why people moved so far to settle in the Wari colony on Cerro Mejía.

We were lucky to find an artifact known to be specific to a particular region, and now we know that some of the people living on Cerro Mejía were indeed from another place--not local and not from the Wari heartland of Ayacucho. But the types of bowls and cooking pots that we found in unit 17 are different from most of the other houses on Cerro Mejía. It appears that not all the people on Cerro Mejía were from the same place.




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For instance, Unit 18 is completely different. Although of a similar overall size to that of unit 17, Unit 18 was a single house with two enclosed rooms and no apparent open patio space. The larger eastern room was well constructed of double faced stone masonry with square corners and durable clay mortar and wall finishing of a reddish-brown color. The smaller western room was also well built however one wall collapsed, making it difficult to define its exact dimensions. Excavations in Unit 18 did not uncover a tomb but did reveal different types of artifacts and different types of religious offerings when compared to Unit 17.

Unit 18 was built on a long, high terrace. The house was entered using stairs from below. The smaller enclosed room is in the foreground. Note the cluster of people working downslope in unit 17 in the center right of this photo. (Cerro Mejía Project)

Unit 18 was remodeled several times and between floors we found offerings of chrysacolla- a stone used for beads and ornaments that resembles turquoise. Also in the final occupation of Unit 18 a small wall was added to the small enclosed room, when the structure collapsed this wall fell over, spilling an offering onto the already partially interred floor. The eroded bones, ash, and carbon when we found it, were likely once llama meat with bones, and plants of some type burnt as an offering during the construction of the wall.



Offerings uncovered in Unit 18. A. A sizable piece of chrysacolla was found between floor layers in the larger room of Unit 18. B. An offering of llama meat and burnt plant material was placed inside a wall in the smaller room of Unit 18. (Cerro Mejía Project)

These features are unique and the stone tools, pottery, and other materials are also different. The mystery remains, even though we now know that some of the settlers on Cerro Mejía came from the Majes or Chuquibamba region we must still study the local traditions of people throughout the Wari Empire to find the original homelands of all the people that settled Cerro Mejía. Many important questions remain and it will take many years more of excavation and laboratory study before we understand the lives of settlers on Cerro Mejía and why they moved to Moquegua as colonists of the Wari Empire.

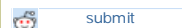


Members of the 2008 project crew visited the top of Cerro Baúl (from left to right Caleb Kestle, Amy Franco, Donna Nash, Anna Kelley, Lacey Carpenter, Alex Menaker, Misty Brum, Lucy Burghardt, and Patricia Tiffin; not pictured Monika Barrionuevo, Susan deFrance, and William Whitehead). The Cerro Mejía Project would like to thank the National Science Foundation, the University of Illinois at Chicago, the University of Florida, and the Field Museum for their support. (Erin Parsons)

**Donna Nash** has a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Florida and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago and Adjunct Curator of South American Archaeology at the Field Museum. She has been researching the Wari Empire in Moquegua, Peru, for more than 15 years and specializes in household archaeology and the analysis of stone tools. Her work examines the expansion and development of early state government and the political activities of leaders. Dr. Nash is director of the Cerro Mejía Project.

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