Chapter 2

America’s First City? The Case of Late Archaic Caral

RUTH SHADY SOLIS
(Translated by Catherine M. Bencic)

THE ORIGIN OF CIVILIZATION IN PERU

Civilization was achieved in north-central Peru during the 3rd millennium BC, between the Santa and Chillón valleys, including the interconnecting valleys toward the east and extending up to the Marañón and Huallaga Rivers (i.e., the region where civilization first emerged in the Central Andes consisted of coast, highlands and Andean forest). Here settlements with both public and domestic architecture have been identified.

Prior to my own project, published archaeological research about the north-central area of the Central Andes strongly suggested its precocious development. These previous investigations included coastal settlements such as Río Seco (Wendt 1964), Bandurria (Fung 1988), and Aspero (Feldman 1980) as well as investigations in highlands sites such as La Galgada (Grieder et al. 1988) and Huaricoto (Burger and Salazar-Burger 1980) and in Andean forest communities such as Kotosh in the Huallaga Basin (Izumi and Sono 1963; Izumi and Terada 1972) and Piruro in the Marañón Basin (Bonnier and Rozenberg 1988). These studies supported inferences that inhabitants lived in organized settlements with public buildings sharing architectural features as well as specific religious rites and ceremonies resulting from periodic interaction. The recurring presence of a group of cultural features in these societies has already been suggested to have been an integrated cultural complex, the Kotosh Religious Tradition (Burger and Salazar-Burger 1980, 1985).

The Supe Valley stands out among the valleys in this region for the quantity, size and complexity of monumental architecture within its settlements. The urban centers of Aspero, Piedra Parada, Era de Pando, Caral, Miraya, Lurihuasi, Pueblo Nuevo, Allpacoto, Peñico and Huacache, among others in the Supe Valley, were inhabited nearly contemporaneously with the Sumerian cities of Mesopotamia and the construction of the Pyramid of Sakara or the later pyramids of Giza in Egypt. But unlike Old World societies such as Mesopotamia, Egypt and India that had exchange networks of goods and knowledge allowing them to benefit from each other’s experiences, the Peruvian process took place in total isolation from other societies on the continent. Indeed, the rise of civilization in Peru preceded
Mesoamerica, the other center of pristine civilization in America, by at least 1500 years.

Caral, in the Supe Valley, was the center of the greatest economic, social, political and religious dynamism of the epoch. Its geographic centricity within the area and its capacity for accumulating surplus from a complementary agricultural-fishing economy were strategic for interregional connections with societies situated in ecological zones with different resources and diverse adaptive experiences as well as distinctive goods. In this paper I review information on the geographic and social conditions of north-central Peru, as well as the settlements in the Supe Valley dating to the Late Archaic Period, as a framework for interpreting the natural and cultural characteristics of the settlement of Caral, its architecture and its excavated cultural contexts. Based on these interpretations and evidence, inferences are made about the economic, social, political and religious organization of Caral’s inhabitants and the population of the Supe Valley and north-central Peru.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN SUPE AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF CARAL

The Supe Valley is short in length and cultivated lands along its margins are narrow. For this reason it is surprising that it contains so many settlements with monumental architecture. Despite this, and the proximity to Peru’s capital of Lima, Supe’s archaeological monuments have not been adequately investigated, perhaps because it has been assumed on very sketchy evidence that the spectacular monumental constructions were culturally affiliated with the Formative Period. Various studies, however, had already been published in the archaeological literature about the site of Aspero in Puerto Supe, demonstrating a pre-Formative date. Aspero was first registered by Uhle in 1905 (Uhle 1925), later identified by Willey and Corbett in 1941 (Willey and Corbett 1954), revisited in 1970 by Willey and Moseley (Moseley and Willey 1973) who recognized the existence of mounds with stepped platforms and the site’s correct dating to the Late Preceramic rather than Formative period, and excavated by Feldman in the same year (Feldman 1980). Only through these last excavations, which yielded corrected dates of 2500 to 3055 BC and characterized the cultural remains, was Aspero assigned to the Late Archaic Period (commonly called Preceramic VI or Late Preceramic by North American archaeologists) of Peruvian cultural development.

Scholarly research, however, did not associate Aspero with other settlements in the valley, despite their greater size and architectural complexity. Since the results from Aspero were published by Moseley and Willey and by Feldman, a controversy has raged regarding the role that marine resources and fishing played relative to agriculture in the development of Andean civilization (Moseley 1975; Raymond 1981; Wilson 1981). Other work in the valley informs us about diverse archaeological aspects, including Kososk’s (1965) visit and photography of Caral, that prompted suggestions about the importance of social developments on the Peruvian coast, Engel’s (1987) surveys and excavated trenches at Caral, and the identification