

Situational Inalienability and Social Change in Formative Period Coastal Oaxaca

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of caches, burials, and mortuary offerings as forms of inalienable wealth in the lower Río Verde valley of Pacific coastal Oaxaca, Mexico. Interred in socially meaningful places, bodies and objects were removed from circulation but remained integral to interactions among the living, acquiring “situational” inalienability. Tracing the history of caching and burial practices over the course of the later Formative period (400 B.C.E.–C.E. 250), we argue that these buried inalienable possessions were important elements of identity creation and also served both to establish and to undermine hierarchical social relations during the process of political centralization.

This chapter will examine how the contents of burials and caches operated as inalienable possessions during the later Formative period in the lower Río Verde Valley of Pacific coastal Oaxaca, Mexico (Figure 3.1). Although bodies and objects were removed from circulation by their placement underground, they remained important components of social interaction among the living. As manifestations of collective histories, these offerings defined local social groups and gave those groups permanence. Simultaneously, burial and caching were part of the redefinition of social groups over time, as inequality and regional political authority became entrenched at the end of the Formative. Drawing on an extensive dataset that spans the Late Formative (400–150 B.C.E.) and Terminal Formative (150 B.C.E.–C.E. 250) periods, we trace the history of burial and caching practices during a time of significant social and political change in the lower Verde. Elites became integral to definitions of community membership, reifying and legitimizing inequality. At

the same time, regional political authority was challenged by persistent expressions of local autonomy. Viewed over time and at varying spatial scales, burials and caches served to establish inequality locally and undermine hierarchy regionally.

We begin by explaining how buried materials operated as inalienable possessions. Inalienability is not a permanent state of being or a characteristic of a specific class of objects (Ferry 2002, 2006; Mills 2004). Rather, inalienability refers to the ways in which materials and knowledge are valued and deployed in social transactions. Inalienable possessions can be transformed into widely transferrable—and therefore alienable—forms, and vice versa. These conversions occur because people use possessions (both material and immaterial) strategically in a wide variety of contexts (Appadurai 1986). Our ability to view social relations over the long term makes archaeologists particularly well placed to examine transformations in the creation and deployment



Figure 3.1. Map of the lower Río Verde valley, indicating sites mentioned in the text (map by S. Barber).

of inalienable possessions. We continue by introducing the lower Río Verde Valley and describing the historical context within which Formative-period burials and caches were placed. The span between 400 B.C.E. and C.E. 250 saw the development of a regional polity that would have changed the nature of local social relations by drawing people away from traditional networks of interaction. We discuss how caching and burial practices were transformed from the Late to Terminal Formative periods. In particular, we examine changes in the location, placement, and types of materials interred. We conclude by examining how burial and caching practices enabled the development and legitimization of inequality locally while simultaneously undermining regional political authority.

The Situational Inalienability of Burials and Caches

Inalienable possessions are materials and knowledge of such great value that they cannot be exchanged or gifted (e.g., Ferry 2002; Godelier 1999; Kockelman 2007; Mauss 1990; Mills 2004; Weiner 1992). Unlike those alienable materials that may be bought or sold using a commodity form of valuation, inalienable possessions embody the overlapping histories of the individuals or groups that have owned them (Godelier 1999:137). As these possessions are transferred, often between generations, they cement the relationship between giver and recipient in these collective histories. Relationships in the present join a chain of connections

extending back into the past and forward into the future. As Weiner (1992:64) observes, “An individual’s role in social life is fragmentary unless attached to something of permanence. The history of the past, equally fragmentary, is concentrated in an object that, with age, becomes increasingly valuable.” Inalienable possessions provide stability and continuity in social relationships by anchoring individuals to objects, memories (e.g., Ferry 2006), or bodies of knowledge, and vice versa. Shared knowledge of the history and location of inalienable possessions distinguishes individuals or groups and can be a means of generating social identities. They are “fixed points” around which groups of people can define themselves and categorize others (Godelier 1999:8).

Despite the impression of permanence that inalienable possessions provide, they are not actually fixed and unchanging. Instead, inalienability is a kind of valuation placed on materials during specific social transactions (Ferry 2002). Materials may circulate via direct exchange for items that are valued similarly, or they may be loaned for indefinite periods of time. In such transactions, a possession is valued in an alienable way that separates it from the original possessor. That same possession may, at another time, be deemed too valuable to exchange or loan. In Precolumbian Mesoamerica, some materials exchanged over long distances—rock crystal, greenstone, obsidian, and iron ores—probably had such shifting valuation. Actions such as working a raw material (Kovacevich, this volume) or using an object in a ritual could transform an alienable item into an inalienable possession. The varying uses of obsidian prismatic blades in the Precolumbian era offer an example of shifting valuation for the same type of item, given that blades have been recovered from both domestic middens or use contexts (i.e., Sheets 1992; Workinger 2002) and caches (i.e., Feinman et al. 2008:table 4). In other instances, inalienability may apply only at certain phenomenological scales. For example, as we will argue in this chapter, the bones of dead children were inalienable possessions of domestic groups in the Late Formative lower Verde, while the bones of some dead adults were inalienable possessions of larger collectivities, perhaps even of entire communities. Because inalienable possessions are inherently historical, value transformations may occur over large time scales. The methods and data sets of archaeology are therefore ideal for identifying and analyzing when, where, and what items were valued as inalienable. Changes in valuation also provide insight into the broader social relations with which these items were involved since inalienable possessions are a means of defining social groups.

The social distinctions that inalienable possessions help to create are also a means of establishing and undermining inequality (Mills 2004; Weiner 1992). Difference is

often ranked in human societies, resulting in the exclusion and subordination of individuals or groups. Inalienable possessions—which circulate in very circumscribed ways if they circulate at all—are an obvious way of enabling or denying access to and control of material resources (Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Schortman et al. 2001), networks of power (Janusek 2004), and knowledge (Hendon 2000; Joyce 2000). At the same time, the circumscriptions placed on the exchange of inalienable possessions can prevent such items from being converted into other forms of authority or hierarchy.

Following this understanding, we believe that the contents of most burials and caches operated as inalienable possessions during the Formative period in the lower Verde. Like many inalienable possessions, the contents of burials and caches were removed from circulation but remained important referents for social action. Both were forms of “morally charged” storage that materialized social ties and constituted collectivities through mutual knowledge of hidden resources (Hendon 2000:46). Given the permanency of their storage location underground, burials and caches contributed to and became saturated with the history of the places where they were interred (e.g., Weiner 1994). Burial sites are inherently historical (Francis et al. 2002; Gillespie 2001) and offer a physical location where the living can continue to interact with the dead (Hutchinson and Aragon 2002). And mortuary offerings are often inalienable either because they cannot be separated from their possessors even in death or because they are of such great value that the living choose to leave these items in the keeping of the dead. Yet, as we discuss on the following pages, neither bodies nor mortuary offerings were necessarily individual possessions. Knowledge of both bodies and grave goods was shared by those who were involved in burial events and who subsequently acted in reference to the dead. Burials often become collective assets deemed inalienable because they establish ancestry, genealogical relationships, and joint ownership of other alienable or inalienable possessions (i.e., McAnany 1995). Caches can be similarly historical: they frequently embed collective action in the site of its enactment, thereby connecting people to places over time.

Nonetheless, we reiterate the situational nature of inalienability. The contents of caches and burials are neither inherently inalienable nor the only type of inalienable possession identifiable archaeologically (Clark and Colman, this volume). For instance, people may have been buried with personal possessions that had more to do with individual tastes than with collective histories and identities. Furthermore, some archaeologically recovered caches may have been created as a result of specific, personal circumstances, including life-cycle events like childbirth (Cyphers Guillén

1993), or may have acted as petitions for divine intervention (Brown 2004). In other cases, the contents of caches and burials would have constituted immovable inalienable possessions. These possessions were part of broader processes through which knowledge, bodies, and objects were transferred between generations in ways that created historically meaningful social groups grounded (literally) in place. As we discuss in this chapter, interment would have removed certain resources from circulation while simultaneously making them collective possessions of the people involved in their placement. Thus, bodies, grave goods, and cached items could be kept and given. We believe that in certain circumstances, such as those described in this chapter, burials and caches provided permanence (e.g., Weiner 1985:224) to the individuals who contributed to, or could claim ownership of, the contents of these features.

The Later Formative Period in the Lower Río Verde Valley

The later Formative period in the lower Río Verde Valley was a time of considerable political, economic, and social change. Throughout the Formative, the region was occupied by Chatino speakers who had initially colonized the valley in the Early Formative or possibly even the late Archaic (Goman et al. 2013; Hepp 2011; Joyce 2010:71–72). Evidence of occupation in the valley is limited to three sites until the later Middle Formative Charco Phase (700–400 B.C.E.), when permanent settlement appears to have extended across much of the floodplain and into the piedmont. By the Late Formative period (400–150 B.C.E.), there were likely two subregional polities centered around the large sites of Charco Redondo (70 hectares) and San Francisco de Arriba (95 hectares), although the existence of local or regional political administration remains hypothetical. Both sites had monumental architecture (Joyce 2005; Workinger 2002). Evidence from burials, domestic architecture, and the distribution of imported items suggests that modest social inequality existed regionally (Barber 2005; Joyce 1994, 2010; Workinger 2002).

The subsequent Terminal Formative period marked the first era of regional political centralization in the valley, when the political landscape was dominated by the 225-hectare site of Río Viejo. A 20-hectare second-order center in the Late Formative, Río Viejo became by far the largest site in a five-tiered settlement hierarchy by the early Terminal Formative Miniyua Phase (150 B.C.E.–C.E. 100).¹ Although the nature of political authority during the Terminal Formative remains poorly understood, changes in regional settlement and the size of monumental structures clearly in-

dicating that actions at Río Viejo had an impact at a regional scale. San Francisco de Arriba saw a considerable decline in occupied area, from 95 to 34 hectares (Workinger 2002). The population decline was accompanied by a cessation of monumental construction at the site, suggesting a relocation of people to Río Viejo or elsewhere in the valley (Workinger 2002:255–256). Regional populations were likely involved in monumental construction at Río Viejo (Joyce and Barber 2011). Prior to C.E. 100, the first buildings of what eventually became the 455,050-cubic meter Terminal Formative earthen acropolis were put into place (Joyce and Barber 2011). Mortuary offerings, cached objects, and domestic architecture suggest that status inequality was well developed by the Terminal Formative (Barber 2005; Joyce 1991a; Joyce et al. 1998; Workinger 2002). For the first time in burials and caches, a number of decorative or imported objects appear, including greenstone, iron ores, rock crystal, and ornate portable objects, such as incised ceramics (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2004; Joyce 1991a; Workinger 2002). A late Terminal Formative elite residence at Cerro de la Virgen included several elaborate architectural features, such as a masonry stairway, vertical slab masonry retaining walls, a large enclosed patio (13 meters by 13 meters), and physical proximity to a ceremonial complex (Barber 2005).

People throughout the valley would have been involved in and impacted by the growing inequality and increasing scale of political authority in the lower Río Verde Valley. Regional political formations would have offered high-status individuals at smaller sites opportunities to augment their standing by expanding and consolidating social networks. Non-elites also would have been affected by the growth of political authority at Río Viejo: they would have provided labor and other resources to support regional political actions, such as monument construction. In short, there were increasing external demands and pressures on local communities through time. As an important means of defining social groups, inalienable possessions were involved in transactions through which people in the lower Verde negotiated the complex and changing Formative-period social landscape.

Burials and Caches in the Later Formative Period

Inalienable possessions in the form of burials and caches played a significant role in constituting local social groups both before and during the era of regional political centralization. Continuities are evident in the contents of both kinds of interments, demonstrating that people

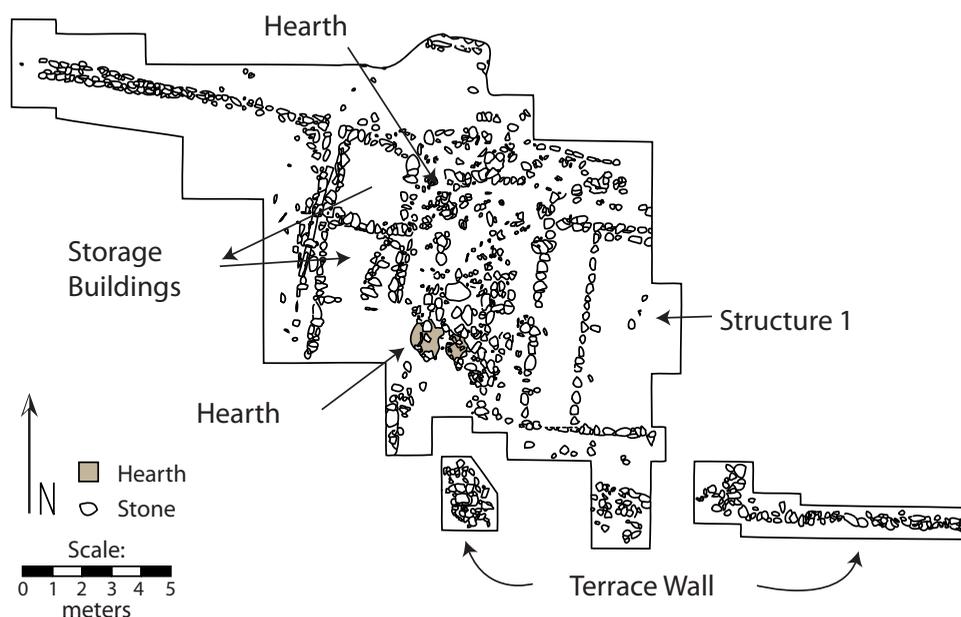


Figure 3.2. Structure 1 features, Cerro de la Cruz (after Joyce 1991b:Figure 4).

continued to remove similar materials from circulation for more than three hundred years. By consistently valuing certain materials—particularly adult bodies—as inalienable, we suggest that the basic definition of local communities as collectivities grounded in shared ancestry, history, and place remained unchanged for centuries. Nonetheless, the contents of burials and caches shifted over time to become more inclusive of social inequality and age diversity. Given that inalienable possessions are objects through which groups are defined and categorized, we see changes in the contents of interred deposits as evidence for modifications in the definition of local social groups, particularly communities, during the growth of the lower Verde's regional polity.

The Dead as Anchors for the Living

Collective burial was a basic element of local social life in the lower Río Verde Valley from the Early Formative through the end of the Terminal Formative (Barber et al. 2013; Hepp 2011; Joyce 1991a; Joyce et al. 1998). Excavations at the small Late Formative site of Cerro de la Cruz recovered 58 individuals buried in public contexts and 28 buried in residential contexts (Barber et al. 2013; Joyce 1991a, 1991b, 1994). The 58 public-context burials were located beneath or near a complex of features that included a small ceremonial structure (Structure 1), a flagstone patio, and several small storage buildings (Figure 3.2). Most burials ($n = 49$) were located beneath the floor or along the

foundation walls of Structure 1 itself and were associated with either the penultimate or final renovation of the structure. Of these 49 individuals, 41 (86 percent) were adult. The ratio of male ($n = 14$) to female ($n = 11$) individuals was nearly even, given that over a third of individuals could not be sexed. No mortuary items were found in any of the public burials. The number of burials and the concentration of adults indicate that the individuals buried around Structure 1 were not members of a single domestic group but rather part of a larger collectivity whose membership was exclusive in that only adults were buried here (Joyce 1991a:255).

Living, and perhaps deceased, members of this collectivity engaged in other activities, such as feasting, at the Structure 1 complex. The patio abutting Structure 1 contained two large hearths associated with the last iteration of the building; one of them had been partially covered over by flagstones after its use. These hearths contained the remains of large quantities of burned wood, ash, and fire-altered rock (Woodard 1991). A third, smaller hearth was located on the interior floor of the structure's penultimate version (Joyce 1991a:215). Two middens, separated by a fill layer but both dating to the Late Formative, were located just to the south of the building. The middens contained maize cupule fragments and high proportions of imported ceramics (Joyce 1994:161; Woodard 1991:869). We believe that these features indicate ongoing social interaction between the living and the dead, or among the living in reference to the dead. Such interactions, as well as shared knowledge of the disposition of bodies, would have defined members of a local



Figure 3.3. Adult male burial with shell sash at Cerro de la Cruz (after Joyce et al. 1998:Figure 3.11).

community. Thus, the dead may have been inalienable possessions of a supradomestic social group identifiable through shared history enacted in a particular place.

Domestic groups appear to have been similarly defined. The 28 individuals buried in domestic contexts were recovered from beneath the floor or near the foundation walls of at least three different residences (Joyce 1991a). While domestic burials were associated with architecture just like the Structure 1 burials, there were two significant differences. First, juveniles predominated in domestic burials ($n = 19$, 68 percent), although males and females were again evenly represented among adults. Second, four individuals buried beneath the floor of a single residence (Structure 8) were interred with offerings. Some of these offerings were impressive: an adult male was interred with a sash of 45 notched *olivella* and *pleuroploca* shells (Figure 3.3), and a child wore a necklace of 22 canid teeth. The four burials were associated with two different construction phases, indicating ongoing inclusion of grave goods in burials among this residential group. Unsurprisingly, this residence was more architecturally elaborate than others excavated at the site, and a nearby midden contained the highest frequency of imported ceramics known for the Late Formative (Joyce 1991a:277, 1991b, 1994:161). When contrasted with the

less elaborate interments from other residences, the Structure 8 burials indicate that inequality distinguished certain domestic groups from others at Cerro de la Cruz. The valuable items included in domestic burials were removed from circulation and would have been inalienable possessions of the domestic group that shared knowledge of these items' disposition. The low number of adults in domestic burials, however, may indicate that some adults were being interred away from the residence in cemeteries like those at Structure 1, where mortuary offerings were not present. So, while inalienable possessions that established inequality were being deployed to define domestic groups, similar items were excluded from transactions among members of local communities.

By the early Terminal Formative period, both age and grave-good restrictions on public collective burials began to erode (Barber 2005, 2008; Barber et al. 2013; Joyce 1991a; Joyce et al. 1998). All but three of the 22 burials known from this time were recovered either from public contexts or in locations where context could not be determined. Thirty-two percent of the early Terminal Formative burials, including one domestic interment, contained mortuary offerings. At the site of Yuguë, two infants, a child, and an adult were interred beneath a public structure (Substructure 1; Figure 3.4). Coarse brown-ware jars were included as offerings with the adult and child. At Charco Redondo, at least ten adults were buried in what was likely a public area. One of these, a male, was interred with a greenstone bead in his mouth and a coarse brown-ware bowl (Butler 2011). Mortuary offerings were also evident in domestic burials. Of the three domestic interments known for this time period, one from Río Viejo consisted of an adult male with a greenstone bead in his mouth. These differences may be related, in part, to changing ideas about the needs of the dead, such as the inclusion of greenstone beads in the mouths of the adult males. But the presence of offerings in public burial contexts also indicates that certain objects and higher-status bodies, including those of children, may have been possessed by communities rather than by domestic groups exclusively.

As with the Late Formative Structure 1 complex at Cerro de la Cruz, feasting and food preparation were undertaken in reference to the dead at Yuguë (Barber 2005). On the occupational surface outside of Substructure 1, three cooking jars were buried to the neck, "lidded" with large sherds and flammable organic matter, and then burned. Burned earth and ash surrounded the mouths, necks, and shoulders of the vessels (see Figure 3.4). One jar contained mussel shell. The events that created these features occurred repeatedly since earlier jars were damaged when additional vessels were subsequently interred in the same location. Furthermore, a midden containing serving vessels, ash, and

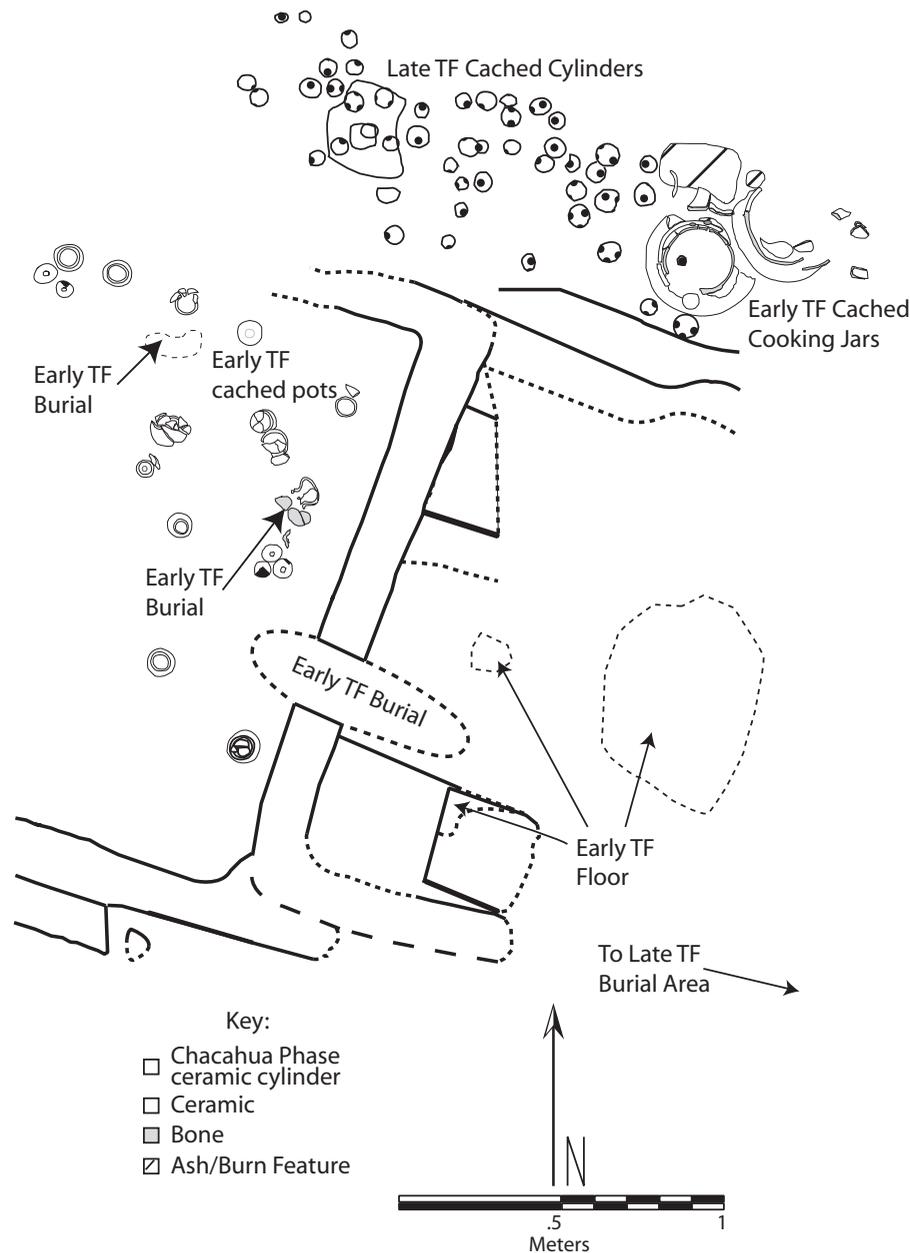


Figure 3.4. Substructure 1 features, Yügüe (image by S. Barber).

estuarine shell sloped off the south end of the substructure. As in the Late Formative, the dead and their grave offerings were important referents for the living during feasts and rituals. The dead were inalienable possessions of local communities that assured intergenerational continuity between people and the place that was Yügüe.

Evidence for community possession of high-status bodies and objects is unequivocal by the late Terminal Formative period. At least 41 individuals were interred in a public cemetery on Substructure 1 at Yügüe (Barber 2005; Bar-

ber et al. 2013). Although no permanent superstructure was found in association with these interments, the burials were likely placed beneath the floor of a perishable superstructure, since the east and south limits of the burial area were abrupt and formed a clear right angle (Figure 3.5). The cemetery contained individuals of all age ranges and both sexes. Four individuals were distinguished by personal adornment and mortuary offerings. Two adult females had pyrite incrustations in their incisors, a subadult male was interred with a pyrite mirror and an incised bone flute, and a child was

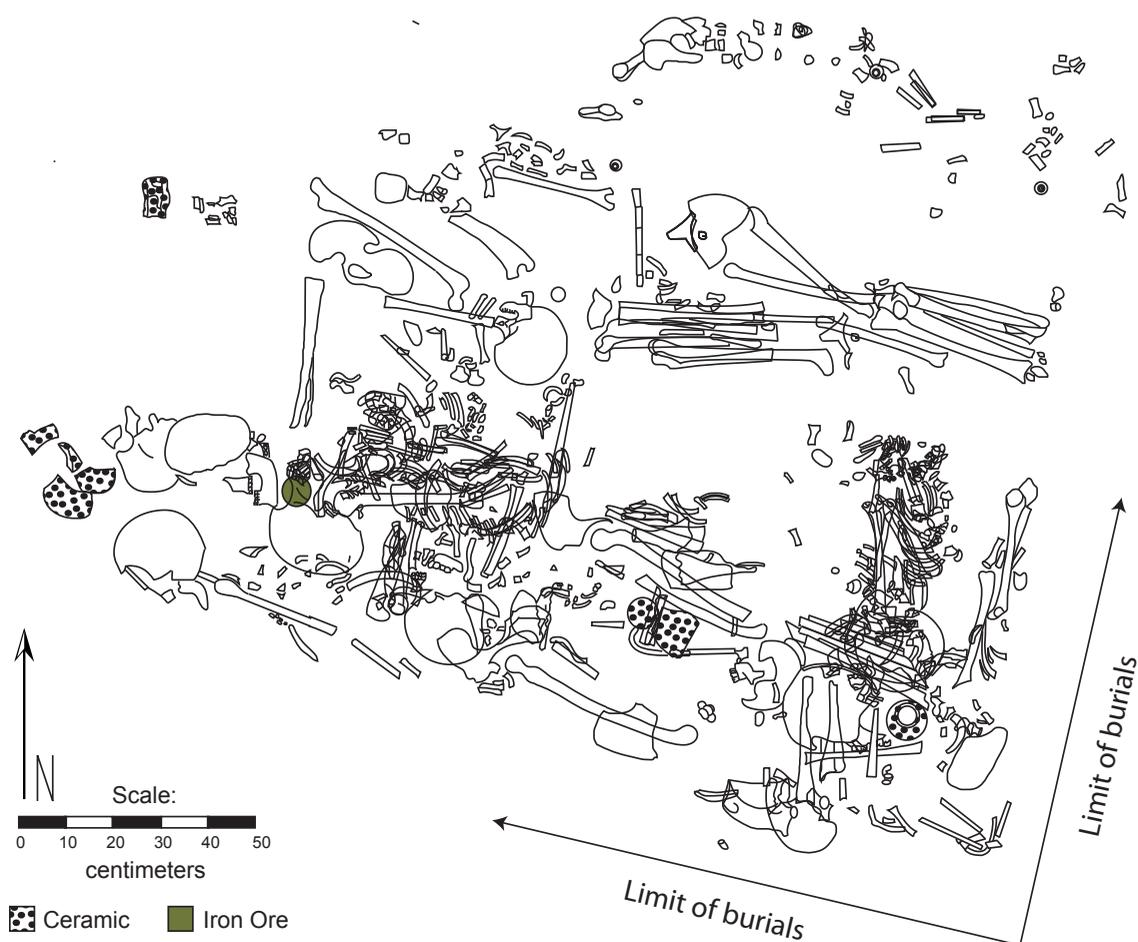


Figure 3.5. *Yügüe* burial area (image by S. Barber).

holding a string of white and green stone beads and wearing an anthropomorphic greenstone pendant. The mortality curve for the late Terminal Formative burials more closely approaches normal preindustrial patterns than any of the earlier public or domestic burial groups (Barber et al. 2013). However, the number of interred individuals as well as the placement of these burials in a public location suggests that this was not a domestic cemetery. Instead, late Terminal Formative burials defined a more inclusive and heterogeneous community than had existed in earlier eras. Social valuables, which in the Late Formative had been possessed by domestic groups, became collective resources about which many community members had knowledge and to which these larger groups had access. The people who had that knowledge and access expanded to include children, a population that had largely been excluded in earlier time periods. There are currently no domestic burials dating to this time period, so a comparison between public and residential interments is not

possible. The only excavated residence from the late Terminal Formative period, however, did not contain subfloor or subpatio burials in sampled areas.

Despite clear differences in membership criteria, late Terminal Formative communities continued the practice of feasting in proximity and reference to the dead. Two middens were located on or next to Substructure 1 at *Yügüe*. These middens had a higher proportion of serving vessels than did domestic middens, and they were located at the summit of a ten-meter-high monumental platform (Barber 2005). Other midden contents included musical instruments, such as fragments of a bone flute, uncommon vessel shapes like *floreros* and small conical vessels, ash, estuarine shell, and fish bones. The dead and their grave offerings were likely intimately involved in commensal transactions that took place on Substructure 1. Literally fixed on the landscape, they would have anchored *Yügüe*'s inhabitants in place and history.

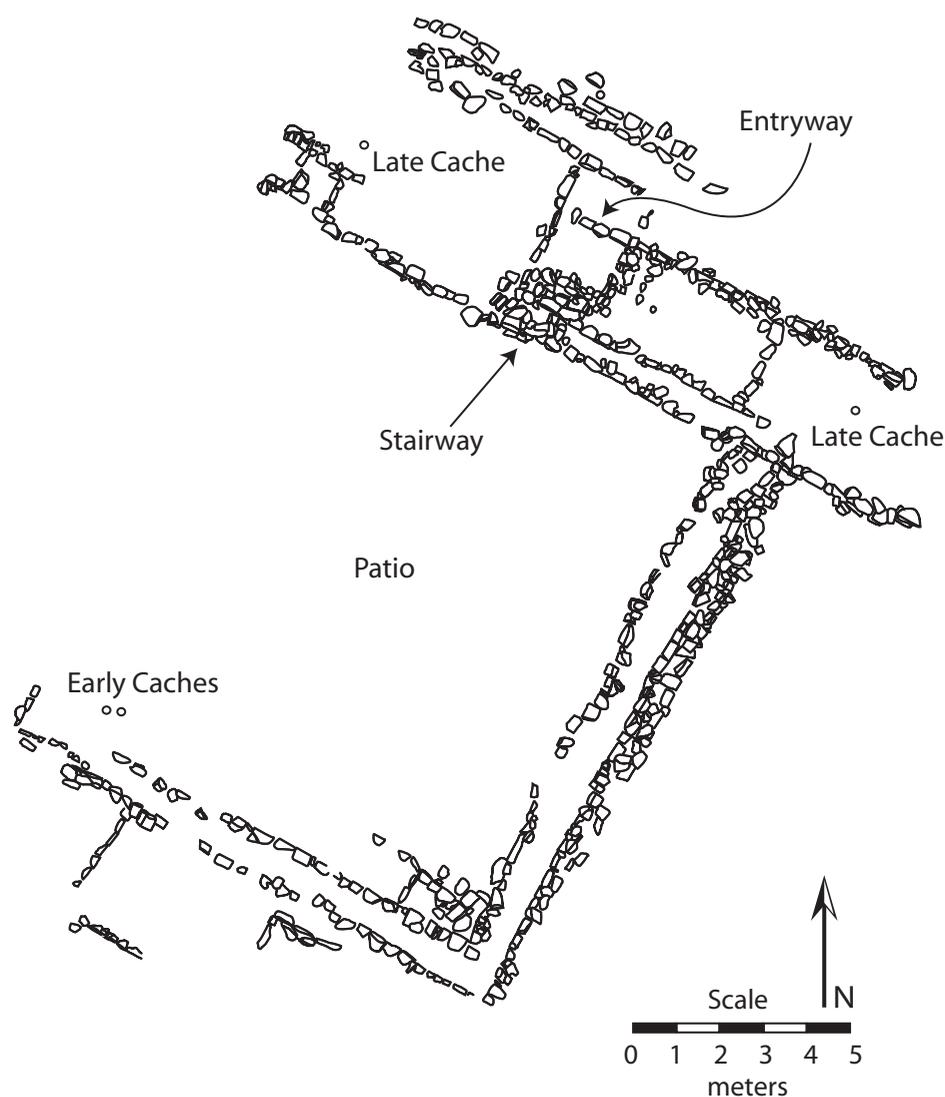


Figure 3.6. Plan view of Residence 1, Cerro de la Virgen (image by S. Barber).

Creating Collective Histories through Caching

In the context of Late Formative- and Terminal Formative-period collective burials, the dead would have been highly valued possessions that assured intergenerational continuity in the places of their interment. Terminal Formative people also stored other kinds of materials underground or beneath buildings in ways that suggest these goods operated as inalienable possessions. As we discuss below, many of these objects were not necessarily valuable because of their raw materials or workmanship; like many inalienable possessions, their value derived from their use in potent transactions that defined social groups and commemorated collective histories. Caches are found in both

domestic and public contexts and appear to have defined groups at various phenomenological scales.

The three Late Formative caches known for the region contained locally produced and acquired materials. All were placed in fill that raised the occupational surface at the base of a long terrace wall (the Lower Terrace Wall; Joyce 1991a:178, 232; Joyce et al. 1998). Because the caches were at the base of the wall and not clearly associated with any residential structure, they were likely in a public context. The first cache held six basalt axes and a basalt adze, all with use wear. The second was comprised of a broken coarse brown-ware jar containing ash or lime, two *manos*, a hammer stone, and a dozen unworked pieces of local granite. The stone in both caches was available locally as river cobbles

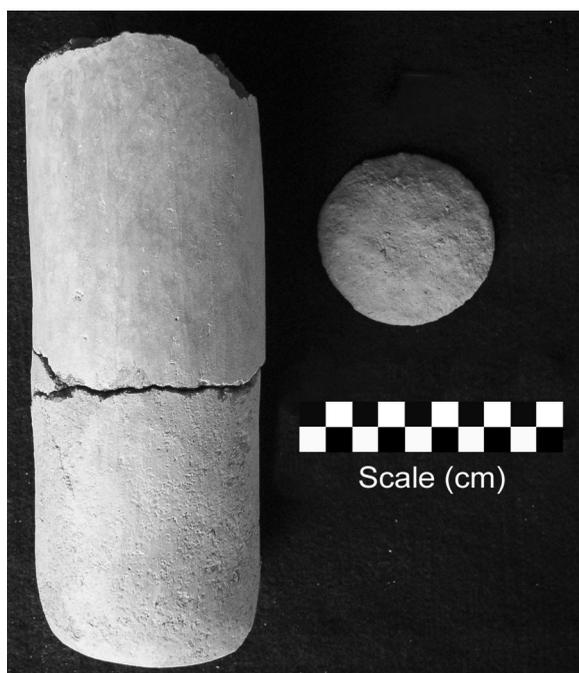


Figure 3.7. Cylindrical vessel from residential cache, Cerro de la Virgen (image by S. Barber).

or at bedrock outcrops. The final cache contained a broken coarse brown-ware jar. All of the items in these caches occurred frequently in other kinds of deposits, including fill, middens, and, occasionally, burials. The placement of these objects in caches suggests that they were transformed from mundane to inalienable during their use in socially significant transactions.

The use of locally produced, sometimes mundane materials in caches continued in the early Terminal Formative. Two public-context caches are known for this time period. The first, from San Francisco de Arriba, consisted of a small, locally made coarse brown-ware globular jar set into the fill of the site's largest monumental structure (Platform 1; Workinger 2002:216–217). Similar vessels were part of a larger cache or series of caches from Substructure 1 at Yugüe. There, ten locally made coarse and fine brown-ware jars and cylindrical vases were placed in fill next to and above the Substructure 1 burials (see Figure 3.4). All of the vessels were topped by small upside-down fine brown-ware bowls and presumably contained perishable materials. It was not clear whether the vessels of this cache were interred simultaneously. The co-occurrence of burials and caches beneath the floors of a single public building at Yugüe suggest that both kinds of deposits were involved in the creation of multi-generational relationships between the living, the dead, and place.

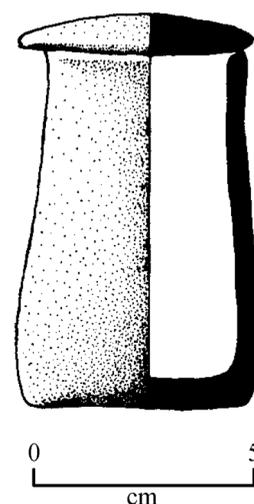


Figure 3.8. Small lidded cylindrical vessel from residential cache San Francisco de Arriba (image by A. Workinger).

Following the pattern seen in burials, some caches became more elaborate and diverse in the late Terminal Formative period. Domestic caches continued to contain relatively modest, locally produced coarse brown-ware vessels. At Cerro de la Virgen, four caches dated to two construction phases of a high-status residence (Figure 3.6; Barber 2013). One of the earlier caches consisted of a pair of small, locally made coarse brown-ware conical vessels; the other held a pair of large unlidded cylindrical vases. The two later caches were likely emplaced at about the same time. Both consisted of a single coarse brown-ware cylindrical vessel with a flat lid (Figure 3.7). One was located in the northern corner of the residence, the other in the eastern corner. They were aligned to the same azimuth as the northeastern walls of the residence. Comparable coarse brown-ware vessels were deposited in a pair of high-status residential offerings at San Francisco de Arriba (Workinger 2002:125–127). The first offering held five cylindrical vases—two large and unlidded next to three smaller, lidded vessels (Figure 3.8). The second offering contained another lidded coarse brown-ware cylindrical vase near the fragments of several nested coarse brown-ware bowls. The caches were located in fill that probably supported a residential superstructure. The vessels at both sites were empty; they presumably held perishable materials. While the lidded vases were almost certainly receptacles of valued items rather than the focus of these offerings, neither durable imported materials, like pyrite and greenstone, nor carefully crafted items, like elaborate pottery, were present. Nonetheless, knowledge of the location and contents of these offerings would have reaffirmed membership in a domestic group much as burials



Figure 3.9. Cached beads, San Francisco de Arriba (image by A. Workinger).

reaffirmed membership in local communities. Placement of these items may have defined the limits of domestic space and distinguished between those who resided outside the limits and those who lived within them.

The apparent modesty of domestic caches contrasts sharply with the contents and size of public ones. At San Francisco de Arriba, seven caches were interred during three construction episodes of a late Terminal Formative superstructure on Platform 1 (Workinger 2002:192–204). The earliest consisted of five coarse brown-ware cylindrical vases similar to those found in the domestic caches. The second, and largest, included nine small gray-ware jars, several of which were elaborately incised; animal bone; 356 greenstone beads and pendants; 27 rock-crystal beads and pendants; 109 additional stone beads; and several thin fragments of hematite or pyrite (Figure 3.9). Among the beads were two greenstone bird-head pendants and two rock-crystal pendants. A third cache contained 32 coarse brown-ware cylindrical vases and animal bone. The other caches were smaller but contained locally made vessels of unusual shape or decoration. They include a lidded cylindrical vase with anthropomorphic appliqué on the interior, a gray-ware cylindrical vessel with three nubbin feet, and a rectangular lidded coarse brown-ware box surrounded by four small conical vessels.

Similarly uncommon items were found in public caches at Yugüe. Two such offerings were located in the fill of a small public substructure (Substructure 2). The first consisted of a large cooking jar containing estuarine mussel shell. This was topped by half of a large gray-ware bowl incised with the image of a man wearing a deity mask (see

Barber and Olvera 2012:figure 14), one of only a handful of anthropomorphic images from the Formative period (Brzezinski 2011); a sherd from a Valley of Oaxaca gray-ware jar; fragments of 16 ceramic earspools; and an incomplete ceramic bird figurine. The second was comprised of four small conical vessels and a rectangular lidded ceramic box. A final group of cached vessels at Yugüe held 135 low-fired coarse-ware ceramic cylinders (Figure 3.10). Fifty were interred in several fill layers spread across Substructure 1. Another 85 were set in fill at the base of the large multi-use platform that formed the occupational core of the site. Both caches' vessels had clearly been interred over an extended period of time by different people, as they spanned multiple strata and were occasionally damaged by the subsequent interment of another cylinder. The cylinders were also made with different pastes and were of different diameters; some were lidded, and some had narrow hollow centers. They look homemade, as if many people with limited experience in making pottery were involved in their production.

While Terminal Formative-period public caches from Yugüe and San Francisco de Arriba were certainly the result of a wide range of social actions, all entailed the removal of materials from circulation. Some of these materials, particularly the imported stone and ceramics, were obtained through long-distance exchange and thus alienable for part of their use histories. Others—notably the boxes, conical and cylindrical vessels, globular jars, and rough clay cylinders—were probably produced specifically for use in transactions that ended with underground emplacement. All ultimately were valued as inalienable and removed from circulation rather

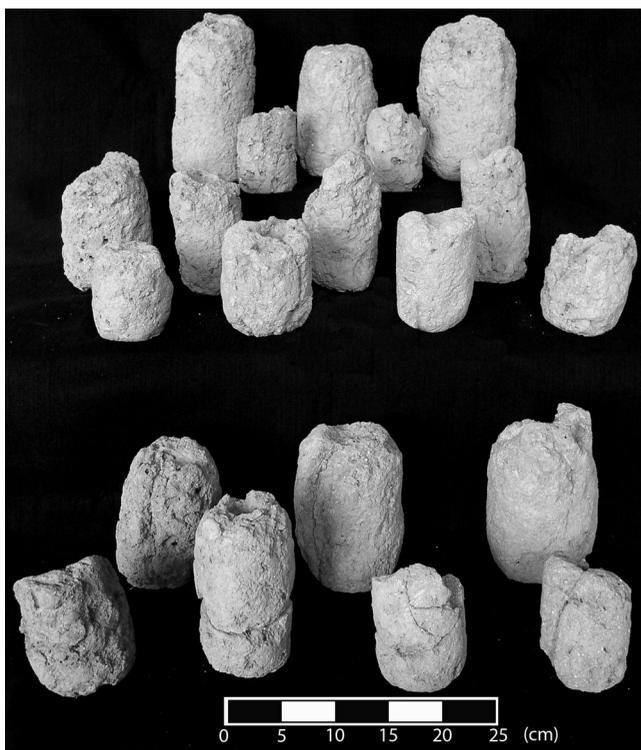


Figure 3.10. Cached ceramic cylinders, Yuguë (image by S. Barber).

than being separated from the people, the places, and the actions with which they were involved.

Inalienable Possessions and Social Change

Later Formative burial and cache data from the lower Río Verde Valley provide insight not only into the kinds of social transactions through which people created and deployed inalienable possessions but also into how social groups were constituted over time. As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, changes in the definition of various social groups are entwined with broader structural changes in status, economics, and politics. We have outlined several broad trends in the creation and utilization of one class of inalienable possessions—immovable items that indicate long-term transformations in relations of inequality and authority.

The movement of social valuables from domestic burials in the Late Formative to public burials and caches in the late Terminal Formative demonstrates the establishment and entrenchment of status inequality at the local level. The age-related differences in burial location during the Late Formative at Cerro de la Cruz show that selected adults from multiple households were being buried together in public fa-

cilities. Community members were not interred with durable objects that defined status distinctions, even though architecture, artifacts, and burial contents from the higher-status Structure 8 residence indicate that status distinctions existed. Community history and action were rendered in terms of uniformity of age and status, at least in public. The very mundane contents of the caches at the lower terrace wall reiterate that collective action above the household level did not entail the deployment of materials associated with status differences. Uniformity was not emphasized in the more intimate setting of domestic mortuary ceremony. Social distinctions are clearly evident in the burials near Structure 8. Formerly alienable materials like marine shell and canid teeth were worked into forms of personal adornment that became permanent possessions of individuals or households. The placement of valuables beneath the floor of the residence enabled the dead and their descendants to keep these items and thus assure intergenerational continuity of higher status.

By the end of the Formative, status distinctions had become intrinsic to the constitution of communities. Rather than deemphasizing inequality in public transactions, individuals of high status were providing once-alienable valuables, like imports and elaborately worked objects for community-scale events. Elites acquired such valuables through well-established, exclusive, and often long-distance exchange networks (Hirth 1984; Joyce 1993). Possession of these items, however, became collective. In the case of burials, both the bodies and the grave goods of some high-status dead became inalienable possessions of the community. The most extreme example is that of the Yuguë flute player, an individual whose potent ceremonial capabilities and paraphernalia were permanently stored in a public cemetery (Barber and Olvera 2012). Cache contents show a similar pattern: high-status residential caches lack the durable, once-alienable valuables found in large public caches. Instead, durable imported or elaborate valuables occur in public deposits about which members of many households would have had knowledge and to which many people presumably had access. The large cache with crystal and stone beads at San Francisco de Arriba is the most obvious example, since crystal and iron ores are not locally available and had restricted distribution in Precolumbian Oaxaca. But other items, like the sherd from a Valley of Oaxaca import and the elaborately decorated local pottery, may also have had limited circulation. Here, we have a classic case of “keeping-while-giving”: elites “gave” the objects to their communities by burying them in public spaces. Interred with other, more modest but still inalienable possessions, these durable valuables remained in the meaningful places where local history was made and remembered.

Nonetheless, the inequality that engendered differences among burials and caches was reinforced. High-status individuals made themselves pivotal to the definition of local communities while simultaneously legitimizing their elevated social position.

Not only did inalienable possessions allow Terminal Formative definitions of local communities to encompass status inequality, but also they provided a long-term stability that would have undermined regional hierarchies. The early Terminal Formative decline of San Francisco de Arriba, concomitant with rapid growth and monumental construction at Río Viejo, demonstrates that people valley-wide were affected by and involved in regional polity formation. Participation in regional social networks would have been uneven, however, with involvement varying based on kinship, status, age, and gender. These regional-scale social changes would have created considerable tension at the local level, where people were being drawn away from traditional sites of social interaction (Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2008). The local deployment of inalienable possessions by a larger demographic section of local communities would have helped mitigate these tensions. For instance, the bodies of children, infants, and even neonates sometimes became community possessions by the late Terminal Formative. By establishing community affiliations before birth, local social ties would have preempted other affiliations, such as those to regional rulers. The inclusion of children also assured that greater numbers of people were involved in the transactions that established collective histories. Based on the size and types of interred public deposits, inalienable possessions were also being deployed with greater frequency by the late Terminal Formative. The interment of over a hundred roughly made cylinders at Yugüe demonstrates that many people of different social positions were repeatedly embedding community relations in place. The frequency of late Terminal Formative caching on Platform 1 at San Francisco de Arriba, as well as the large size of several of the caches, confirms that frequent collective action was taking place valley-wide. Yet the kinds of materials deemed inalienable and the disposition of those materials was idiosyncratic, meaning that these actions were locally focused rather than mandated by regional rulers.

Local efforts to maintain autonomy in the lower Verde appear to have been successful. The regional polity was short-lived, collapsing by C.E. 250 (Joyce 2010). But the loss of political authority created social instability that brought about the depopulation or abandonment of many floodplain sites, including Río Viejo and Yugüe. Many of those possessions once deemed inalienable to the people who lived at these sites, including the bodies of the dead, ultimately lost their value and relevance and were left behind (see Lohse,

this volume). Viewed through the lens of inalienable possessions, the collapse of the lower Verde polity appears catastrophic, as people abandoned the possessions and places through which they had defined themselves for centuries.

Conclusion

Weiner (1985:210) states that inalienable possessions can be distinguished by “the power these objects have to define who one is in a historical sense.” They become “dense” (Weiner 1994) with the histories of their possessors, whether they are individuals or collectivities. Those histories become part of people’s identities in the present and serve as resources in social transactions. Here, we have considered a specific category of inalienable possessions: items that are immovable. Weiner’s own work (1985, 1992) emphasized portable objects. Although movable items may seem categorically different from something like a burial or a monumental structure (Clark and Colman, this volume), we assert that both fixed and mobile inalienable possessions can be viewed as “in circulation” in certain circumstances. Cached vessels and their contents—as well as the dead and their associated offerings—remained essential points of reference for the living in the lower Río Verde Valley. We have ample evidence for repeated use of burial locations, re-exposure of previously buried people and cached vessels, and ongoing human activity in the structures where caches and burials were interred. Placement underground did not completely remove people and objects from circulation. They continued to change hands as generations passed, remaining part of social reality for centuries.

The inalienability of caches and burials, however, was (and is) situational. There was nothing inherently inalienable about these features or their contents. We suggest that there is nothing inherently inalienable about any class of material culture, even heirlooms (c.f., Clark and Colman, this volume). Indeed, in the lower Río Verde Valley, burials appear to be valued quite differently in the subsequent Classic period (C.E. 250–800; Joyce 2010:552–553, 563–564). Inalienability is derived from how people deployed goods and knowledge in social transactions—and, in the case of archaeology, how the analyst deploys the concept to make sense of the past.

Note

1. Late Formative Río Viejo actually consisted of three small, disarticulated sites. The largest was 20 hectares; the others were four hectares and one hectare.

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