

Chapter 2

The Sechín Alto Complex and Its Place Within Casma Valley Initial Period Development

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INTRODUCTION

The Sechín Alto Complex was defined by the authors in 1987 as a group of related sites covering over 10 sq km in the Casma Valley on the north coast of Peru (Figures 2.1, 2.2; S. and T. Pozorski 1987: 82). Critical to the definition of the Sechín Alto Complex were the consistent orientation and similarity in mound form and site layout of Sechín Alto site, Taukachi-Konkán, and Sechín Bajo. Cerro Sechín was included based on its physical proximity to the other sites and its conical adobe constructions which suggested contemporaneity with the other sites. The component sites of Sechín Alto, Taukachi Konkán, Sechín Bajo, and Cerro Sechín were assumed to be coexistent and in continuous interaction, forming an immense settlement that occupied much of the floodplain in the northern Sechín Branch of the Casma River during the Initial Period (2150–1000 BC; dating in this paper is based on calibrated radiocarbon dates using Stuiver and Becker 1993). Subsequent prehistoric and historic use of the area, largely in the form of cultivated fields, has obscured evidence of smaller, more fragile residential structures within the valley bottom, leaving only the larger mounds. Remains of this vital component do exist, however, on the valley margins to the north and south (S. and T. Pozorski 1998: 86–87).

Work within the Sechín Branch of the Casma River Valley prior to the 1980s focused on the site of Cerro Sechín which attracted attention as early as 1937

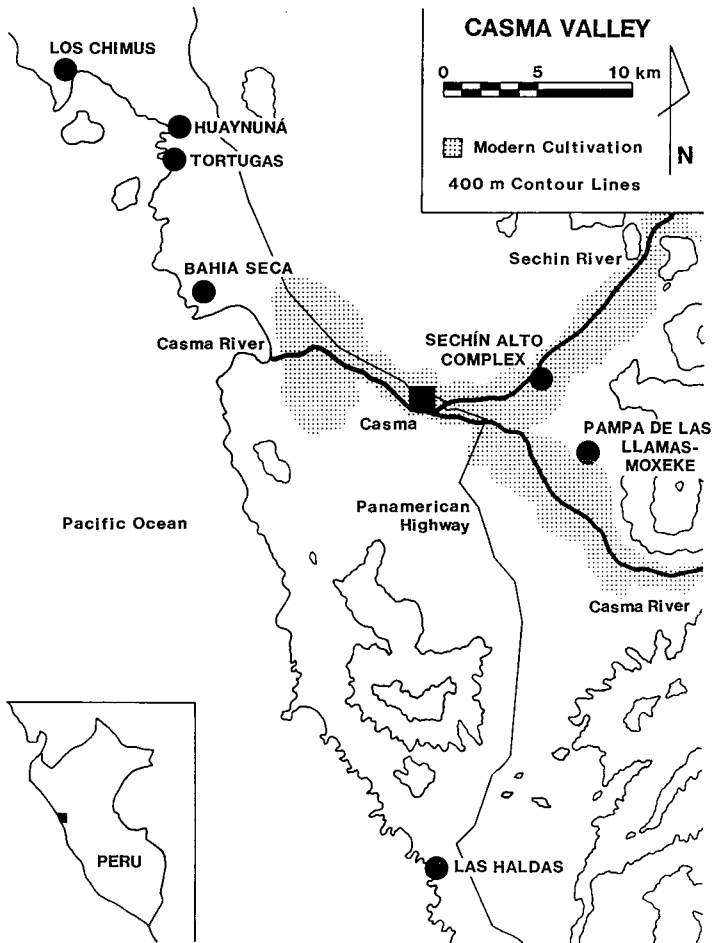


Figure 2.1. Map of the Casma Valley area showing the location of early sites discussed in the text.

because of the stone sculptures which were readily visible on the surface (Bueno and Samaniego 1969; Collier 1962; Samaniego 1973; Tello 1943, 1956). Other Sechín Alto Complex sites have been surveyed (Carlevato 1979: 29–39; Collier 1962: 411; Fung and Williams 1977: 116–120; Kosok 1965: 214–215; S. and T. Pozorski 1987: 71–82; Tello 1956: 79–82; Thompson 1961: 201–224, 1962: 294, 1964: 207–208), and Sechín Alto site was briefly tested (Collier 1962: 411). The authors began excavation within the Sechín Alto Complex in 1992 with investigations at the site of Taukachi-Konkán which continued through the 1994 field season. Subsequent fieldwork, beginning in 1995, has concentrated on the

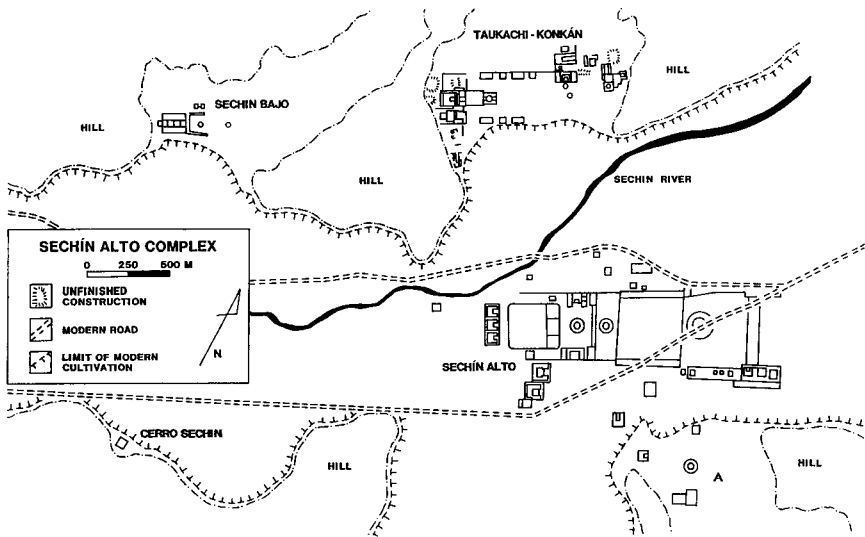


Figure 2.2. Plan of the Sechín Alto Complex showing the location of its four component sites and the domestic area of the site of Sechín Alto (A).

principal mound at the Sechín Alto site within the complex (S. and T. Pozorski 1994a: 70–72; T. and S. Pozorski 1993: 59–60, 1994: 61–62, 1999: 100–107).

Recent fieldwork has shed light on Casma Valley site chronologies, revealing that different sites were in use at different times during the Initial Period and documenting a complex interplay among component sites of the Sechín Alto Complex and between the sites of the complex and other sites within the greater Casma Valley area (Figure 2.1). Preliminary data suggesting connections among Sechín Alto Complex sites, Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke in the south branch, and certain coastal sites north of the Casma River mouth indicate that the greater Casma Valley area was unified during the early Initial Period by the Moxeke polity which existed during a time span defined here as the Moxeke Phase. Near the end of the Initial Period, during the time span labeled here as the Sechín Phase, political power became centralized by the Sechín polity within the Sechín branch as Pampa de las Llamas Moxeke ceased to be occupied; and the coastal site of Las Haldas, which had long existed in isolation, was incorporated as a major satellite of Sechín Alto Complex sites. Within the Sechín Alto Complex, the site of Taukachi-Konkán best illustrates Moxeke Phase use of the complex whereas the site of Sechín Alto contains the best-documented evidence to date of Sechín Phase occupation of the complex. Other publications by the authors describe Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke in considerable detail (S. and T. Pozorski 1986, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1992a, b, 1994a, b, 1998; T. and S. Pozorski 1988, 1992,

1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1999). This paper will focus more on the results of recent fieldwork within the Sechín Alto Complex, on relevant data from the coastal satellites, and on a definition of the Moxeke and Sechín Phases.

TAUKACHI-KONKÁN, SECHÍN ALTO AND OTHER INITIAL PERIOD SITES

Taukachi-Konkán

Excavations by the authors during the 1980s and early 1990s focused on Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke and the coastal satellite communities (S. and T. Pozorski 1986, 1991, 1992b, 1998; T. and S. Pozorski 1988, 1995, 1996, 1999). Subsequent fieldwork within the Sechín Alto Complex initially focused on the site of Taukachi-Konkán (Figure 2.3) because of its state of preservation and

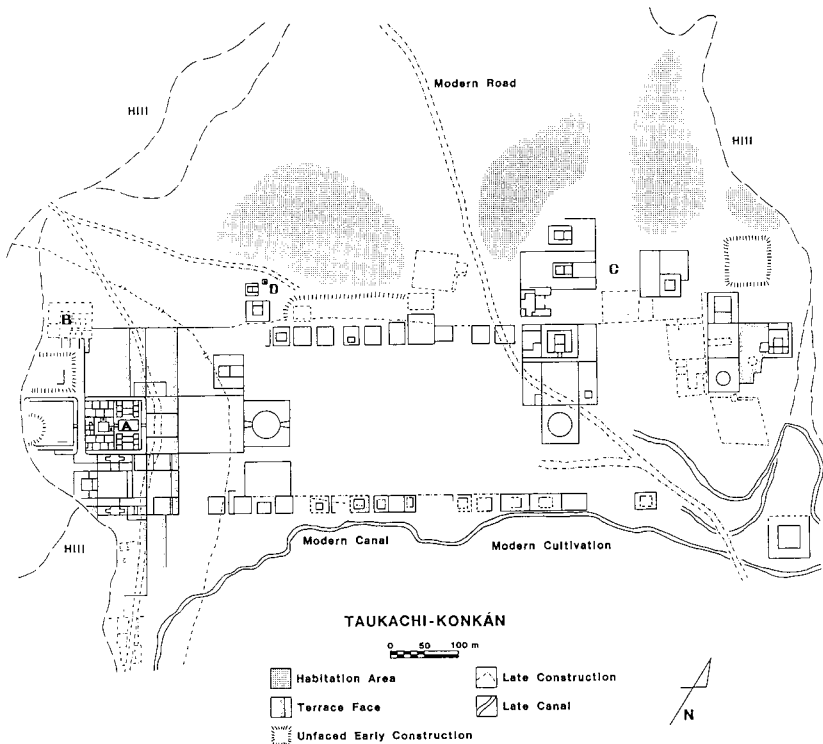


Figure 2.3. Plan of Taukachi-Konkán showing: (A) Mound of the Columns; (B) late compound; (C) possible prehistoric road; (D) ventilated hearth structure.

because of apparent similarities to the relatively well-known site of Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke. Connections between the two sites observed from surface evidence include the bilateral symmetry of the main mound and much of the associated site layout that takes its orientation from the main mound axis, circular plazas associated with major mounds, intermediate-sized mounds arranged in rows along the site axis, a possible north-south road, and the use of conical adobes in public constructions. Excavations at *Taukachi-Konkán* revealed additional key traits shared with Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke that, along with radiocarbon dates for both sites (Table 2.1; S. and T. Pozorski 1998; T. and S. Pozorski 1999), argue for their contemporaneity and significant interaction during the Moxeke Phase. However, differences between the two sites provided critical evidence concerning the function of their respective monumental architecture and each site's place within the Moxeke Phase polity that united the Casma Valley area. There is evidence of later, Sechín Phase occupation of *Taukachi-Konkán*; however, the impact on site architecture was relatively minor. The site was reoccupied prehistorically, during Late Intermediate Period times; and this postprimary use of the site had considerable impact on the architecture. Stones were robbed from the Mound of the Columns (Figure 2.3A) to construct a small compound (Figure 2.3B) as well as a wall that loops around the mound area; and additional compounds and walls were constructed in the central and eastern portion of the site, often incorporating Initial Period structures.

The site of *Taukachi-Konkán* is dominated by the Mound of the Columns (Figure 2.3A), a single large mound, measuring $90 \times 80 \times 10$ m high, with its accompanying circular court, that establishes the orientation of the site. Two rows of intermediate-sized mounds, also aligned with the site's axis, border a large plaza area forming the site's center. Two additional mounds, smaller in size than the main mound, are located near the west end of the site. Each is associated with a rectangular and circular plaza, and both are orientated toward the site's center. Two or three additional intermediate-sized mounds in the northeastern portion of the site open toward the east, facing and defining the route of a probable road that entered *Taukachi-Konkán* from the north (Figure 2.3C).

The authors have argued elsewhere that, at Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke, the principal mounds of Moxeke and Huaca A functioned respectively as the loci of religious and commodity storage and/or distribution activities for the site (S. and T. Pozorski 1986: 383–390, 1987: 34, 1991: 345–350, 1992b: 853–856, 1994a: 67, 1998: 84–85; T. and S. Pozorski 1993: 53–54, 1994: 54–56, 1999: 95–99). Excavations at *Taukachi-Konkán* resulted in evidence of a third substantially different functional interpretation of the main mound there as a palace or royal residence (S. and T. Pozorski 1994a: 72, 1998: 85; T. and S. Pozorski 1999: 101–106). Critical to this assessment of the principal *Taukachi-Konkán* mound is the marked contrast between the eastern two-thirds of the mound summit, which constituted the public portion of the mound, and the western one-third of the summit, which