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PROYECTO QOCHAMAMA?

EXPERIENCES, PERCEPTIONS, AND REPRESENTATIONS OF THREE FEMALE CO-DIRECTORS AT TIWANAKU, BOLIVIA

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Between 2005 and 2010 we codirected an interdisciplinary field project at Tiwanaku, a UNESCO World Heritage site in the Andean region of Bolivia. During the first millennium, the ancient city of Tiwanaku was the political and ritual center of one of the first states in South America (Kolata 2003). Today, Tiwanaku is one of Bolivia's most important tourist destinations (Sammells 2012). The indigenous Aymara also revere the site and identify themselves as descendents of the site's inhabitants. Given its importance in Andean prehistory and its prominent status in Bolivian history, Tiwanaku has been the location of many national and international archaeological projects.

We founded the Proyecto Jacha Marka (PJM) as a long-term interdisciplinary field and laboratory project focused on the intensive study of the Mollo Kontu neighborhood at Tiwanaku. The purpose of this research was to examine the ways in which different forms of social identity and affiliation (e.g., age, class, sex, kinship, and ethnicity) were forged through the practice of daily life, including the construction and renovation of domestic structures, use of monumental architecture, diet and cuisine, ritual practices, and the organization of urban space within a non-elite neighborhood.

Within the context of Tiwanaku research and Bolivian archaeology in general, our project was unique in that it was the first to be directed by three women. Previous projects at the site included women as lead excavators, laboratory specialists, and senior collaborators; however, as can often be the case with major archaeological projects at prominent sites around the world, project directors and principal investigators at Tiwanaku more commonly had been individual males. As part of the COSWA-sponsored series on women archaeologists in the field, we share a few of our experiences as three, female co-directors. Although colleagues in the field have certainly made note of our gender, we have never been significantly hindered in our fieldwork due to sexual discrimination. Our greatest challenges have come primarily from the fact that there were three of us.

Proyecto Qochamama/Pachamama

For the most part, we did not experience any prejudice or doubts that women could run a successful project in Bolivia. Although there have not been female directors of major field projects at Tiwanaku itself, there have been several influential women running archaeological projects in Bolivia. For example, Christine Hastorf (1999) has directed a large, international project on the Taraco Peninsula since 1992, and Bolivian archaeologists such as Sonia Alconini (2008) and Claudia Rivera (2010) have also directed projects in other regions of Bolivia. Overall, the Bolivian governmental authorities seemed to treat us as any other group of project directors seeking permission to work in their country. Some, however, highlighted the fact that the project was run by women and openly referred to us as "Proyecto Qochamama" and "Proyecto Pachamama," and others noted that our research area had particularly feminine qualities.

This article is part of an occasional column on Women Archaeologists in the Field sponsored by COSWA.

In Bolivia, Qochamama roughly means “mother of the qochas,” and in this context refers to the numerous artificial ponds of water found in the Mollo Kontu area at Tiwanaku. It is also the name of a stela reportedly found in the area. In part for these reasons, some *yatiri* (ritual specialists) claim the Mollo Kontu area is “feminine,” and therefore “a little dangerous and powerful” and in need of more ritual attention than other areas. The other term used to label us, Pachamama, translates as Earth Mother, a female deity in Andean cosmology who is associated with agriculture, fertility, and reproduction. Before any archaeological project begins in the highlands, *yatiri* prepare an offering for Pachamama that includes a llama fetus, coca leaves, candy, and other items. It is burned and buried to assure that the project will be successful because, after all, excavations require digging into and taking objects from the earth.



Figure 1: The three project directors (Left to Right): Nicole Couture, Deborah Blom, and Maria Bruno.

Since we were unaware of any such nicknames used to linguistically mark male-dominated projects, we took these as potentially chauvinistic terms but we also understood them as something of a compliment. Qochas are precious resources in the arid *altiplano*, and Pachamama is a highly revered entity; in fact, President Evo Morales named his new environmental policy law after her. So while the nicknames clearly signaled that we were women, we gladly accepted them and the responsibilities that accompanied them.

Three's Company?

The most noteworthy challenge we faced was not the fact that we were women, but that we were *three* codirectors. At Tiwanaku and elsewhere, it is most common to have single site directors, though there are several projects with two directors. That this tripartite configuration did not conform to popular perceptions and representations of archaeological field directors was particularly evident during our participation in the filming of an episode of the Discovery Channel series “Bone Detectives” in July of 2008. The host and “detective” of the show is a lone male archaeologist who helps solve unusual or “mysterious” burials encountered on excavations in different parts of the world. In the case of Tiwanaku, the focus was on a set of children’s remains we encountered at the base of the Mollo Kontu platform mound structure. We agreed to participate in this program because it would bring our project and Tiwanaku archaeology to a broader audience; however, handing over the representation of our work to non-archaeological writers and directors did present some challenges and frustrations.

In preparation for this television project, we had decided that we would like to be filmed together in some segments of the program to show that we were a team of directors that worked collaboratively to both run the project and interpret the findings. To accommodate the “detective story” that the writers had prepared about the mound burials, it was necessary to film each of us, and other project members, individually to discuss the various pieces of evidence. These interviews did reflect our particular areas of expertise: Nicole Couture discussed the architecture of the mound and the unusual layout of the burials; Deborah Blom provided an analysis of the human remains; and Maria Bruno discussed the plant remains. During filming we were encouraged to develop and articulate our own particular lines of interpretation and, in some instances, it seemed that we were being pushed to contradict each other. This may have simply been for dramatic effect and not meant to be confrontational, but we were wary about playing into outdated stereotypes that assert that strong, professional women cannot get along or that differences

in opinion between scholars are antagonistic. The focus on individuals began to frustrate us, and we insisted that they also film the reality of us discussing these ideas as a group. While they did fulfill our request, this footage did not make it to the actual episode. Instead the only indication that we were each directors of the project came in the title that flashed on the screen as we were each introduced. In the end, it was a lost opportunity to show the diversity and variability of how modern-day archaeological projects can be, and increasingly are, directed.

The reality is that codirectorship can be messy. In the field, we were often moving between on-site excavations, laboratory, and field house individually. As we visited each of our hard-working teams, we would be asked questions about how to proceed on a particular task. Given that we each came from different field experiences and analytical specialties, in the early days of the project it was not uncommon for us to give contradictory advice. We quickly learned that this could be problematic and worked to remedy the situation. While the ideal situation would have been for us to meet, discuss, and come to a consensual decision, this was not always possible. After a few contentious situations, we determined that we had to divide particular responsibilities and trust each person's decision. For particularly important queries, however, we would take the extra time to meet together and discuss them as a group. Moreover, there were certain tasks, such as meeting with community leaders or government officials to negotiate permits, which required a public expression of authority and unity. In these situations it was very nice to have each other's support and to present ourselves as a formidable, Pachamama-worthy front.



Figure 2: Mario Bruno conducting flotation analysis.



Figure 3: Deboral Blom and Ruth Fontenla at work in the field.

We continue to learn how to share leadership responsibilities as the focus of our project makes the transition from the world of fieldwork to the dissemination of our research findings, including coauthored publications. While interdisciplinary research is becoming more common in the humanities and social sciences, few anthropology departments have clear guidelines for evaluating collaborative scholarship. In negotiating authorship, we strive to find a balance between ensuring that all get full credit for their work and, at the same time, support each other in our various states of professional and personal development.

Conclusion

A project led by three female codirectors was unique at Tiwanaku, Bolivia and is perhaps still quite rare in most parts of the world. We believe, however, that it reflects a growing trend in the

diversification and increasingly collaborative nature of archaeology in the twenty-first century. We cannot deny the complex interactions of factors such as gender, race, class, and education, but our acceptance by Bolivian authorities and indigenous community leaders as female directors of a large project at the most prestigious archaeological site in their country shows that gender is not the primary concern in this context. Perhaps our work was facilitated in part by the fact that there are important cultural entities such as Pachamama and Qochamama that engender powerful female roles. It is undeniably due to the fact that we followed in the footsteps of other successful women archaeologists in Bolivia. Finally, we were all fortunate to have had mentors (both male and female) who encouraged us to take on such leadership roles.

Our experiences are not necessarily unique to us being female, but apply to any project that has multiple directors. While we have learned that the time and cooperation required for this kind of research should not be underestimated, we have also found that collaboration is immensely satisfying and the results gained from it are far greater than one could accomplish on one's own. Sharing these experiences with our colleagues and working to find new means to represent this type of collaborative directorship will be an important goal for us in the future.

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