

# Reinterpretation of Tulán-52 excavation suggests social complexity among late hunter-gatherers

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Credit: *Antiquity* (2018). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2018.195

A pair of researchers has found evidence at the Tulán-52 excavation in Chile that suggests the need for a reinterpretation of how the stone complex was used. In their paper published in the journal *Antiquity*, Lautaro Núñez with Universidad Católica del Norte and Catherine Perlès with Allée de l'Université, suggest the new evidence shows more social complexity among the later hunter-gatherers who built and used the complex than previously thought.

In this new effort, Núñez and Perlès have revisited two stone complexes excavated in the Atacama Desert in Chile. Both were built by Neolithic people thousands of years ago. One site, called Tulán-54 is believed to

be older than the second—perhaps as old as 5000 years. The second site, named Tulán-52 is believed to have been used from approximately 1110-900 BC until 550-360 BC. Excavation for the first was completed in 1985—the second was finished in 2015. After much study, researchers working on the excavations concluded that the complexes were semi-sedentary settlements—people both lived in them and used them for ceremonies. In this new effort, the researchers suggest that neither site was ever used as a place to live. They note that both complexes show many signs of being used for rituals but lack signs of settlement. Gold-plated vulture heads have been found, for example, along with mortars and grinding slabs that were used to prepare pigments, and plants that contain hallucinogens. Also, the remains of more than two dozen infants were found.

In studying the complexes and the artifacts, the researchers found more similarities between the two than found in prior studies—similarities that suggested more complexity than had been realized before. They suggest that the layout of Tulán-54 and its artifacts indicate that the site was like a fully developed ceremonial center. The way the stones were used to build the complex is one example suggesting a massive concerted effort.

The researchers also suggest that innovations that occurred in the second site, such as using camelids to carry material to the site, the use of farming to feed the people, and plant processing to produce hallucinogen effects and metallurgy, all point to a ceremonial purpose—though they suggest it is still not clear what the ceremonies were for.

**More information:** Lautaro Núñez et al. Tulán-52: a Late Archaic ceremonial centre at the dawn of the Neolithisation process in the Atacama Desert, *Antiquity* (2018). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2018.195](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.195)

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