The people huddled in their impregnable fortress atop the high mesa called Cerro Baúl, their last refuge as the mighty Inca legions swept through the valley far below. With its sheer walls and single, tortuous route to the top, the citadel defied attack by storm, so the Inca army laid siege to Cerro Baúl. For 54 days, the people held out. But with little food and no water, they found their redoubt was not only a grand bastion but also a grand prison.
The Moquegua Valley had been in the Tiwanaku orbit until the Wari made their bold thrust into the region. To secure their political outpost, the Wari intruders strategically settled the towering Cerro Baúl and the adjacent pinnacle of Cerro Mejía. Unraveling the nature of this intruding colony and its relationship with the surrounding Tiwanaku is a long-standing concern of the Asociación Con-tysa, a consortium of Peruvian and American scholars investigating the region. Recent mapping and excavation at Cerro Baúl and adjacent sites are beginning to reveal pieces of this puzzle.

Where the two competing nations met, their citizens apparently chose cooperation over conflict. Our excavations find no evidence of warfare during the centuries (from about A.D. 600 to 1020) in which the Wari and the Tiwanaku shared the valley and its scant water. Goods and ideas almost certainly were being exchanged; interaction was inevitable, if for no other reason than to discuss rights to the most critical resource of the andean. Water streaming from mountain rainstorms had to pass by a Wari canal before it reached Tiwanaku fields.

Furthermore, we recovered a Tiwanaku-style kero (a drinking vessel used in ceremonies) among the Wari’s most sacred ceremonial offerings yet found at the site—a strong argument for ritual interaction between the two groups who shared the valley.

Archaeologists excavating the summit of Cerro Baúl (the layout of the once-majestic city is shown at right) discovered strong indications of cooperation rather than warfare in the frontier region shared by citizens of the two empires. Among the evidence is this unusual kero (a drinking vessel) set in an important ritual that was found at the Wari temple of Cerro Mejía. A key element, it is decorated with elements of both Wari and Tiwanaku cultures, and depicts the Staff God, an important deity for both societies.

It was, for nearly five centuries, a majestic city that dominated the frontier. Clearly, the Tiwanaku had some impact on the most important aspect of Wari life—religion.

The 25-hectare (62-acre) summit of Cerro Baúl—some 600 meters (nearly 2,000 feet) above the valley floor—was clearly the political and social crown of the Wari outpost. Yet most of the empire’s citizens lived not on the top, but on terraces cut into less lofty heights.

When the Wari arrived in the valley, they introduced an agricultural technology of terracing steep slopes and digging long, serpentine canals across the broken land. A 10-kilometer (6.2-mile) canal wound from the Torata River through the El Pano Divide between Cerro Baúl and Cerro Mejía, where the water courses split to irrigate expansive terraces that staked off the flanks of both hills. This high-country irrigation system may be the key to the Wari’s successful expansion into the extremely arid Moquegua Sierra, especially during severe droughts from A.D. 562 to 594 and from A.D. 650 to 750.

The summit of Cerro Baúl is divided into two areas of very different architecture. A monumental core comprises...
An Intoxicating Ritual
A Sacrament of Drunkenness Built Loyalty in the Andes

A n essential sacrament of both the Wari and Tiwanaku empires — and of the failed Inca who succeeded them — centered around chicha, an alcoholic beverage that was imbued until participants were hopelessly drunk.

The drinking rituals were designed to cement relationships between inferiors and superiors within the empire by reducing all parties to a shared state of staggering intoxication. The main pottery forms found at a ceremoniously destroyed sacred structure at Cerro Baúl are large urns and drinking vessels — keros, which were almost certainly used to store and serve chicha, the intoxicating beverage made from maize.

More importantly, a number of the keros bear a depiction of the Staff God, or Wiracocha, the principal deity shared by both Wari and Tiwanaku. The Tiwanaku influence on hybrid Wari keros reflects the...