1 Unveiling Tiwanaku's Mystery

> "History is messy for the people who must live it."
>
> – Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995:110

Some fifteen hundred years ago in the brisk Andean high plateau, or *altiplano*, Tiwanaku became one of the most important and influential centers in the Americas (Figure 1.1). Perched at a skyscraping 3,800–4,000 meters above sea level, the altiplano strikes contemporary sensibilities as cruelly cold and supremely challenging. For many, it is a remote place one visits to purchase colorful alpaca clothing or to test one's endurance climbing perilous peaks. One is tempted to think that the altiplano could not have fostered one of the earliest, most enduring, and fascinating civilizations of the ancient world. Yet it did, as abundant ongoing research confirms.

Tiwanaku emerged at approximately AD 500, about the time Imperial Rome was being submitted to memory. It collapsed at around AD 1100, not long after King John signed the Magna Carta in foggy Runnymeade, England. By any historian's calculation, six centuries is a long time, and this cultural and political longevity begs explanation.

In this book, I explore Tiwanaku's long history and unique character. I summarize vast bodies of past and recent research to demonstrate that its endurance stemmed from an ancient cultural inheritance, social and ideological tolerance, extensive economic ventures, unparalleled religious prestige, and vast popular appeal. It ultimately succumbed to severe environmental stress, continental political shifts, and its own strategies of state consolidation and class formation. This study of Tiwanaku's rise and fall offers an extraordinary case study of state legitimacy and fragility, and of cultural uniformity and diversity. It suggests caveats regarding the potential legacy of the civilizations we live in, hold dear, and routinely celebrate or criticize today.

Much about Tiwanaku remains a mystery. The site's original name may have been the native term *chucara* (Anello Oliva 1998 [1631]:60),

Figure 1.1 The altiplano. The Eastern Cordillera is in the background.

"sun's home" in Pukina, or *taypikala*, "central stone" in Aymara (Cobo 1990[1653]:100). The first invokes a key celestial-symbolic icon of later Andean imperial religions and the second the monumental stonework that shapes the identity or "soul" of people from the modern town of Tiahuanaco. Today, Tiahuanaco natives are nicknamed, partly in fun, *kalawawa*, or "stone babies." Both names may have been employed, for they resonate with Tiwanaku's ancient past. *Chucara* may refer to the solar elements of Tiwanaku religious ideology, and *taypikala* to Tiwanaku's place at the center of a long-lived Andean civilization and between diverse cultural and geographical realms. Like the Inca empire several centuries later, the Tiwanaku state proselytized an innovative and highly prestigious religious complex. Rulers and commoners together promoted a cosmology in which the center, as the social and ceremonial axis of the civilized world, mediated society, nature, and the cosmos.

In this chapter, I introduce Tiwanaku by delineating a history of research into its character and chronology. I then outline current knowledge regarding culture history in the Lake Titicaca Basin, Tiwanaku's heartland (Figure 1.2). I introduce Wari, an expansive state centered in the Ayacucho Basin of Peru that interacted and occasionally clashed with Tiwanaku. Next, I outline the theoretical underpinnings of the book and my approach to Tiwanaku and prehispanic history in the region.

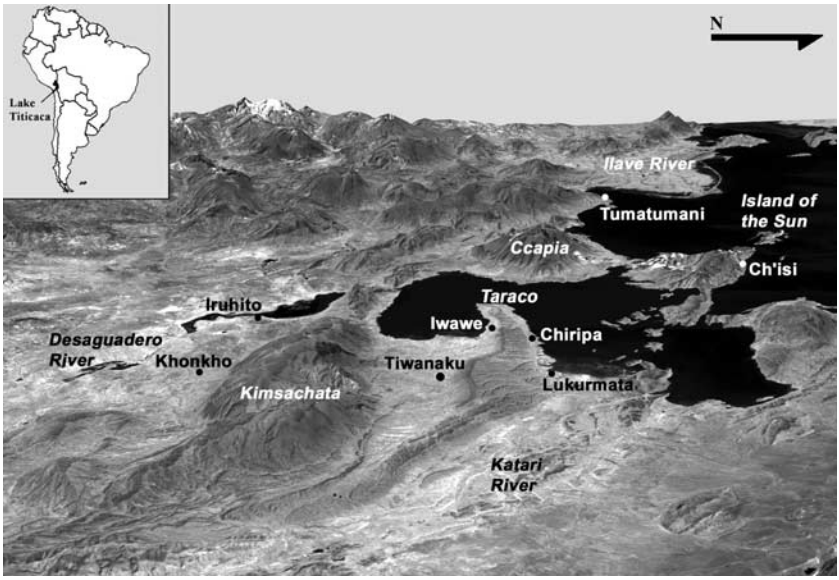


Figure 1.2 The southern Lake Titicaca Basin showing key sites (base map by Arik Ohnstad). The southern part of the lake highlighted here is known as Lake Wiñaymarka.

A History of Tiwanaku Research

Fifty years ago, knowledge of Tiwanaku hinged on myth and yarn. Tiwanaku has been appropriated to an array of political, intellectual, and industrial projects. Its monuments have been buried, defaced, decapitated, and blown up. In early historical periods, carved stones from monumental constructions were mined to build residences, tombs, churches, and mills in Tiahuanaco, nearby towns, and La Paz (Cobo 1990[1653]; Lizárraga 1909[1605]; Squier 1878:274). The long history of Tiwanaku's cultural appropriation begins with the Inca. Located in the lucrative Inca province of Collasuyu, and a three-week trek from the royal capital in Cuzco, Tiwanaku boasted enigmatic sculptures and massive architectural ruins that inspired "great admiration" and awe in its visitors (Molina 1916[1553]:13). Just as many inhabitants of Western civilization think of the Near East, the Inca considered Tiwanaku their place of cosmic and ethnic genesis.

Inca Legitimacy and Colonial Chronicles (1535–1800)

Early writers concur that Inca royalty considered Tiwanaku and nearby Lake Titicaca the places where the heroic creator deity Viracocha once

fashioned the then-current incarnation of the Andean cosmos. In a fascinating twist, these accounts attribute the origins of Andean cultural diversity and the original definition of the Andean landscape to Tiwanaku. Numerous chroniclers (e.g., Betanzos 1996[1551–1557]; Sarmiento de Gamboa 1999[1572]) recounted a myth in which Viracocha first fashioned Andean society at Tiwanaku or on the nearby Island of the Sun. According to Sarmiento (1999:34), Spain's first official Andean historian, Viracocha then "went to a place now called Tiahuanacu [*sic*] . . . and in this place he sculpted and designed on a great piece of stone, all the nations that he intended to create." He provided each "nation" its language, clothing, hairstyle, music, dances, and signature crops. Each group was to enter the earth, travel underground, and spring forth like a plant near a particular feature – whether a tree, lake, spring, cave, or mountain – that would henceforth be its principal *huaca*, or sacred place.

Viracocha then charged the two individuals to remember the name of each group and its place of origin. Together, the three traveled north by northwest. One followed the Western Cordillera hugging the Pacific coast, the other the rugged Eastern Cordillera overlooking the eastern valleys, or *yungas*. Viracocha himself followed the highland route in between. The purpose of their journey was to "call forth" from the earth – essentially, to harvest – all of the diverse nations or ethnic groups of the Andes that Viracocha had fashioned. Their synchronized journeys defined the three major environmental zones of the Andes: the dry Pacific coast, the humid eastern valleys, and the highland sierra. In this manner, Inca imperial ideology implicated Tiwanaku in the creation of Andean social and geographical diversity, and more important, in its cultural unification.

A few early chroniclers visited the altiplano and wrote tantalizing but brief descriptions of Tiwanaku's ruins. They include the young Spaniard Pedro de Cieza de León, "a common soldier with an uncommon eye for detail" (D'Altroy 2002:11). Cieza visited Tiwanaku in 1549, just seventeen years after Francisco Pizarro and his band of *conquistadores* had captured the Inca ruler Atawallpa. Cieza described the massive temple known as Akapana as a "man-made hill, built on great stone foundations" as well as the "finely built" walls of the Kalasasaya, which, according to some natives, had inspired Inca imperial architecture. He marveled over several great "stone idols" near the buildings, "of human size and shape, with the features beautifully carved, so much so that they seem the work of great artists or masters" (1959[1553]:283). Cieza also noted that the Inca used Tiwanaku as an architectural model and that Manco Capac, son of the last legitimate Inca ruler, Wayna Capac, had been born at Tiwanaku (1959:284; also Cobo 1990:105). Yet when he asked whether

the Incas had built the monuments, the natives "laughed at the question, repeating . . . that they were built before they reigned" (1959:282–284). Cieza surmised that Tiwanaku was the "oldest antiquity" in the Andes.

It appears that the Inca had merely claimed ancestry to the ancient kings of Tiwanaku to legitimize their rule, by proclaiming the site a sacred place of cosmic origin and by emulating its impeccably crafted monuments. The question thus remained: Who created Tiwanaku?

Armchair Archaeology: Naturalists, Explorers, and Enthusiasts (1800–1945)

Scholars seriously turned to this question again following Bolivia's independence in 1825. The prior 150 years of Spanish Colonial rule had produced a hiatus of inquiry into Tiwanaku, most likely due to the cumulative social unrest that characterized the south-central Andes during this time. In the decades following Spanish arrival thousands of natives perished yearly, whether in battle or by succumbing to new diseases such as smallpox and measles. By the 1560s Spanish administrators were forcibly relocating native populations to Potosí, in the central altiplano, as cheap labor to mine silver. Lands were left desolate and scores of workers died daily due to collapsing shafts, physical exhaustion, and mercury poisoning. After 1570, the Spanish imposed radical resettlement programs (*reducciones*) to facilitate effective administration in the Andean countryside. They built central pueblos in an attempt to eradicate local ties to landscape and promote cultural amnesia among native populations, and to facilitate privately run *haciendas* where natives worked as indentured servants.

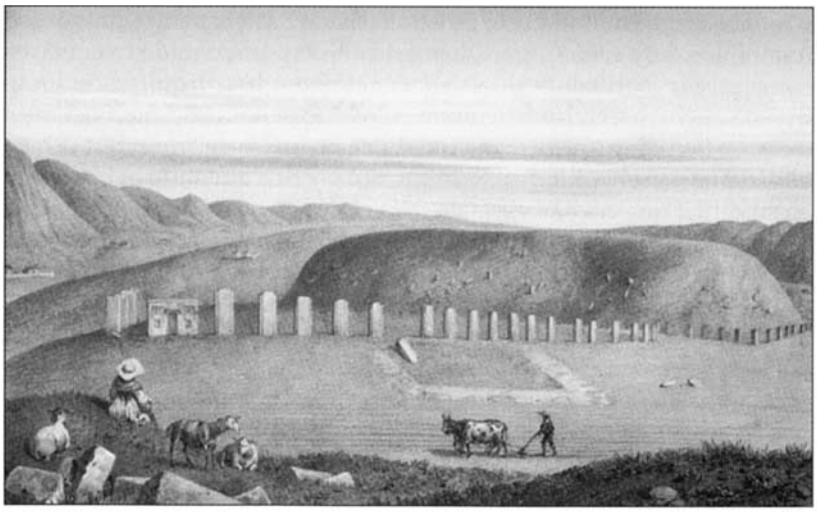
A salient sense of native history and social identity reemerged slowly in the seventeenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, increasing social tensions and a series of minor rebellions fostered full-blown revolts led by native and *mestizo* revolutionaries such as Tupac Amaru, in southern Peru, and Tomas Katari, in the Bolivian altiplano. These messianic movements refashioned ancient myths and symbols to challenge the Spanish imperial regime, leading European administrators and writers to consider the Andean countryside a dangerous place inhabited by rebellious Indians.

Meanwhile, on the progressive winds of the European Enlightenment, new intellectual disciplines promoted the objective study of natural and human history. As biological and cultural evolution became influential conceptual paradigms, social thinkers tended to categorize societies according to their degree of "civilization." Hand in hand with such protoanthropological writing went an interest in discovering the ruins of past

civilizations around the world, especially those considered reminiscent of Europe's past cultural patrimony. In light of its enigmatic architectural wonders, Tiwanaku was interpreted as an exotic, ancient center of Andean civilization. Yet, for many of this intellectual temperament, people from distant cultures, continents, or even galaxies were considered responsible for building and inhabiting Tiwanaku.

Nineteenth-century explorers and "armchair archaeologists" produced some of the first detailed descriptions and speculative interpretations of Tiwanaku's monuments. In 1799, the Bohemian naturalist Tadeo Haenke wrote an illustrated account of sites in the Lake Titicaca basin, and created one of the earliest sketches of Tiwanaku's megalithic Sun Portal (Ponce 1995). More comprehensive descriptions followed the influx of foreign diplomats and naturalists after Bolivia's independence. Particularly astute in this era was the French naturalist Alcide Dessalines d'Orbigny (1944[1839]), who visited Tiwanaku in June 1833. D'Orbigny defined Tiwanaku's principal temple complexes – the Kalasasaya, Akapana, and Pumapunku – and interpreted the central image of the Sun Portal as a religious and political ruler (Figure 1.3a). His work helped inspire the first national museum, for which Bolivian President José Ballivián commissioned "excavations" to collect Tiwanaku relics (Albarracin-Jordan 1999).

Many explorers recognized in Tiwanaku the ruins of a center that had thrived long before the Inca. The German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1878:372) admonished his European audience to visit "the center of an ancient civilization." Still, Tiwanaku remained a mystery, in no small part because of what many considered its intractable environment. The British naval cadet Clemens Markham (1862) considered Tiwanaku the political and intellectual center of a "megalithic empire" that had stretched across the Andes long before that of the Inca. Perplexed by the high altitude of the ruins, however, he speculated that the altiplano had been located hundreds of meters lower than it was during his own time. The North American Ephraim George Squier (1878), President Lincoln's Commissioner to Peru, also was struck by Tiwanaku's stark environment and poor soils. He took the first photographs of the site, made maps of its structures, sketched its monumental sculptures, and described the ruins, estimating their expanse at 3 square kilometers (Figure 1.4a). Because of Tiwanaku's altitude and "harsh" setting, and for lack of "any traces of habitations," Squier concluded that it had been but a pilgrimage center consisting of isolated monumental structures. As he put it (1878:300), "Tiwanaku may have been a sacred spot or shrine, the position of which was determined by an accident, an augury, or a dream," but it had not been "the seat of dominion."



A

B

Figure 1.3 Two Victorian views of Tiwanaku's ruins: (a) Alcide D'Orbigy (adapted from Parejas and Reyes de Parejas 2002); and (b) Leonce Angrand (adapted from Prümers 1993).

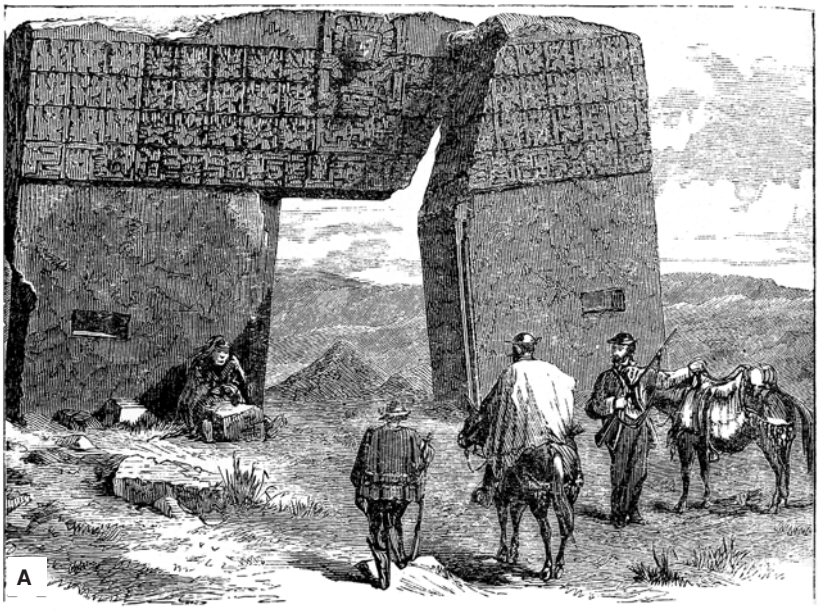
A common thread linking the thought and writing of many nineteenth-century adventurers, a thread remarkably vital today, is the idea that native Aymara-speaking "Indians" could not have built Tiwanaku's magnificent monuments. Several writers proposed far-fetched speculations in support of overtly racist assumptions. Francis de Castelnau favored the idea that Egyptian pharaohs built Tiwanaku, not the "imbicilic race that inhabits the country today" (Castelnau 1939:56[1850–1851]).

Leonce Angrand (1866; Prümers 1993) speculated that peripatetic Toltec immigrants from the Central basin of Mexico first built Tiwanaku (Figure 1.3b). In a similar vein, the Marquise de Nadaillac argued that, indeed, a Nahuatl speaking race, perhaps the Mexica-Aztec, founded Tiwanaku (1939:75[1883]). Others were more equivocal. If Squier believed that "the civilization of ancient Peruvians was indigenous" (1878:569), the location of Tiwanaku's "beautifully cut stones" among the "wretched" and "impoverished" Aymara struck him as incongruous. Such ideas live on in remarkably popular, supremely ill-researched New Age notions that Tiwanaku was founded by enlightened Egyptians or Atlanteans (Bellamy 1948; Hancock 1996). On the ludicrous, if entertaining end of the spectrum is the notion that Tiwanaku was inspired by aliens from outer space (von Däniken 1971)!

The supreme embodiment of Victorian mythology was Arthur Posnansky (1914, 1945), an eccentric Austrian who lived and worked among Tiwanaku's ruins for much of the first half of the twentieth century. If for him native altiplano communities had descended from the ancient Qolla, they were now "completely devoid of culture" and "live a wretched existence in clay huts which seem . . . the caves of troglodytes" (1945, Vol. 1:33). Like others, Posnansky believed that climatic conditions had been much more favorable in the distant past. "Climatic aggression," Posnansky argued (1945, Vol. 1:2), fostered Tiwanaku's decline and its subsequent cultural diffusion as the "Cradle of American Man." Despite recent scientific research that roundly challenges such ideas, Posnanky's quasi-racist speculations continue to fire upper and middle class imaginations and amateur speculation around the world (as testified by a quick surf through the World Wide Web).

Early Archaeology (1890–1958)

More rigorous interpretations of Tiwanaku emerged around the turn of the nineteenth century. Max Uhle, who first visited Tiwanaku in 1894, laid the foundation for systematic archaeological research in the Andes (Figure 1.4b). Before setting foot in the Andes, Uhle collaborated with Alphonse Stübel (1892) to describe and illustrate Tiwanaku's monumental constructions. They considered the Kalasasaya an "American Stonehenge," and suggested that it was one of several isolated structures that together formed an early religious site of paramount regional influence. Unlike many adventurers, Uhle believed that the builders of Tiwanaku had been ancestors of the altiplano's Aymara-speaking communities, but that memory of greatness had withered upon the civilization's eclipse (Stübel and Uhle 1892:62). He later defined a pan-Andean "Tiahuanaco



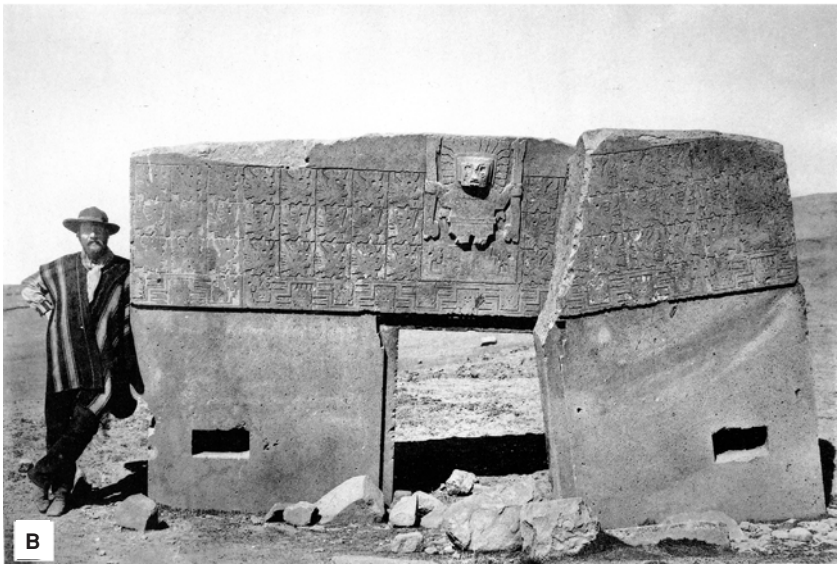


Figure 1.4 Two Victorian views of the Sun Portal: (a) Ephraim Squier approaches the monument on horseback (after Squier 1878) and (b) Max Uhle leans against it (after Stübel and Uhle 1892).

Style," later termed the Middle Horizon (Rowe 1960), that predated Inca style by centuries.

Adolph Bandelier, Uhle's contemporary, visited Tiwanaku in 1894 and then left to conduct excavations on the nearby Islands of the Sun and Moon (1910). Bandelier broke the mold and suggested that Tiwanaku had incorporated several thousand inhabitants, inferring that it had been a city as well as a ceremonial center (1911). He observed that prehispanic dwellings, much like those inhabited at the time of his visit, had been earthen buildings consisting of adobe bricks or hard-packed *tapia*; impermanent materials that long since had eroded onto the landscape. Bandelier admonished archaeologists that they had concentrated exclusively on Tiwanaku's striking monuments, neglecting the "more modest features" that truly illustrate "the mode of living of the people" (1911:221). Like Uhle, Bandelier believed that the native Aymara-speaking community members who inspired this insight were descendants of Tiwanaku's original inhabitants.

By the turn of the century, the Andes had gained popularity among educated circles in North America and Europe as an exotic, rugged region. Scores of foreigners embarked on the long journey to Tiwanaku to gain firsthand experience of ancient ruins and, in some cases, to assemble precious collections for export to home countries. Such activity fed on and promoted looting. As Alan Kolata and Carlos Ponce surmise, such "expeditions . . . took on a transparently neocolonial character in which Bolivian citizens played auxiliary roles, or none at all, and crates of irreplaceable objects were shipped overseas without so much as an inventory" (2003:23). In the early twentieth century, amateur enthusiasts such as Colonel Diez de Medina and Fritz Buck (Querejazu 1983; Sagarnaga 1987) amassed massive collections of archaeological artifacts. A few decades later, national response to this cumulative activity would profoundly affect the course of Bolivian archaeology.

Tiwanaku suffered a particularly egregious moment of destruction in 1902–1903, when a railway joining La Paz with Lake Titicaca was built right through the site. The construction crew mined hundreds of Tiwanaku's finest ashlars and monuments to build railway platforms and bridges, exploding the larger stones with dynamite to make a level rubble fill. To one of many protests, a cynical crew member replied, "So much the better that these stones have endured to serve two civilizations" (*my translation*; Arguedas 1911:236, cited in Ponce 1995:117).

Georges de Créqui-Montfort, the recently-arrived director of an interdisciplinary French scientific mission to the south-central Andes (Créqui-Monfort 1904), sought to stop the destruction. Part of his intent in studying Andean natural and human history was to conduct excavations at Tiwanaku. In 1903, when by circumstance Créqui-Monfort was