

Two New Snuff Trays Found in the Humahuaca Region, Argentina

Alicia A. Fernández Distel*

Art Space Nicasio Fernández Mar, Argentina

**Corresponding Author: Alicia A. Fernández Distel, Art Space Nicasio Fernández Mar, Argentina.
Email: aliciana04@hotmail.com.*

ABSTRACT

In the province of Jujuy, NW of Argentina, 50 'snuff trays' in relation with the ancient consumption of psychoactive compounds—mainly obtained through unsystematic surveys—have been recorded.

The most important archeological sites inspected have been: Cusi Cusi, Casabindo, Doncellas, Rinconada, Santa Catalina, Pucara de Tilcara, Juella, and Cienaga Grande.

In this article we describe two snuff trays, hitherto unknown, included in the Torres Aparicio's private collection in Humahuaca. They were apparently obtained from the archaeological site Peñas Blancas, together with a lot of significant elements also made of wood. One of the trays has little men figures carved in its handle. In the other, the handle presents a hollow central figure that can be associated to a bird (may be a condor).

INTRODUCTION

'Quebrada De Humahuaca' (The Humahuaca Ravine)

The Quebrada or Valle de Humahuaca, a ravine settled in Jujuy (Argentinian Northwest), was declared a 'World Cultural Landscape' by the UNESCO.

The Quebrada de Humahuaca was the first South American cultural landscape registered on the World Heritage list after an important ceremony held in Paris on July 2nd, 2003. There only exist two more cultural landscapes, which are in Cuba, in the whole American continent. Therefore, the Humahuaca ravine is the third one.

A 'cultural landscape' is supposed to enhance the value of the mixture that results from the work of man and nature. Man, work began 12,000 years ago. At that time, a group of hunter-gatherers with a developed kind of art, both mobile (wood and stone carvings, amulets, pendants) and immovable (rock art), started to settle in the ravine. Geologically speaking, since the Quebrada de Humahuaca is a valley that originated due to a tectonic fault, it is considered a testimony of all stages of the Earth's formation. Mountains show weird shapes and colours, with heights ranging from 3,900 to 13,000 feet above sea level.

Also called 'Alto Peru' in Spanish colonial times, the Quebrada is a natural path linking Argentina to Bolivia and the currently International Train to La Paz is used to go through it.

This is the fact that precisely corroborates UNESCO's criterion II: the ravine has been used as a key path for the transport of people and the circulation of ideas for more than 10,000 years from the Altiplano (High Plateau) — shared by Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile— to the plain or the Pampas, through an extension of 150 kilometres.

The selection criteria IV and V, which made it possible for this Argentinian region to be chosen, specify that, due to its strategic location, the Quebrada de Humahuaca has favoured human settlement, trade, and agriculture in a particularly dramatic and impressive landscape.

For the future, UNESCO makes the following recommendations to the Argentine authorities:

- The Final Management Plan should be fulfilled as soon as possible.
- An environmental monitoring should be carried out to improve the conditions of this landscape.

The objects presented in this article, which are, by the way, kept in a new archaeological

Two New Snuff Trays Found in the Humahuaca Region, Argentina

museum, contribute to a gradual and deeper understanding of this Andean cultural landscape of South America.

Such promotion is expected to help the Humahuaca region be considered for another UNESCO project, which is going to include not only Argentina but also Peru and Bolivia. This project entails the restitution of the Qhapac Ñan or Camino del Inca (The Inca Trail).

‘A Curious Custom’

That is how Max Uhle (1915: 116-117) called the habit of inhaling stimulating powders by means of a complex paraphernalia that included three unavoidable and basic artefacts:

- a receptacle for the powder
- a tray to spread the powder
- a straight tube to insufflate the snuff into the nose

Besides, some ethnographic sources confirm the use of other accessories: bags, spatulas, spoons, and cactus thorns.

The oldest record of snuff-taking found in Huaca Prieta, Peru (Wassen 1967: 256-257) — specifically dating from the Guañape period and with an age of approximately 1200 BC—, invalidated the hypothesis stating that the practice had begun during the Formative (Formative Period). However, the maximum expansion of this custom took place during the Tiawanaco horizon.

The pulverized vegetable substance employed could be tobacco or piptadenia. The seeds of trees belonging to this genus (whose more updated designation is *adenanthera*) include species known by the common names of parica, yopo, vilca, and sebil (Schultes y Hofmann 1979). According to Latham (1938:107-108), piptadenia powder is stronger than that of tobacco. The author distinguishes between the medicinal administration of inhaled tobacco — of which there is documental evidence in the Ancient Incan Peru— and the ‘vice’ of compulsive niopo-taking.

However, both plants were used by shamans and priests to cause ecstasy during religious ceremonies and divination. Nowadays, vilca seeds are generally prescribed by local herbalist doctors and commonly sold in Bolivian supermarkets.

The interrelation between these plants, one cultivable and the other wild, one used because of its leaves and the other for its seeds, is

complex, intricate, and difficult to solve when dealing with the archaeological evidence. In fact, the Wichi Aborigines from Argentina still smoke sebil and tobacco. The large number of formative cultures in this country that used stone and ceramic pipes supports the idea that both vegetables enjoyed the same level of popularity due to their stimulating and even hallucinogenic power.

There are two words that are constantly uttered when delivering a paper on this issue: these are rapé and snuff, which belong to the French and the English language, respectively; they indicate this product’s state, that is, finely ground. Because the Spanish language borrowed the French term, the phrase *un complejo de rapé* (a snuff complex) became quite acceptable.

The fine grinding must do with a rarely mentioned element of the paraphernalia: little mortars, most of which are estimated to be made of stone.

So as to conclude our exposition on the ‘curious custom’ of snuff-taking, it is worthwhile considering what Nuñez explains about this practice; basically, he describes what was the practice like until the nineteenth century in the Brazilian Amazonia (1963: 158): (the trays) were manufactured with wood and employed for the absorption of parica, exclusively used for narcotization and physical punishment by male couples (female carvings can be observed in only two trays), who met in the house of the parica, where women prepared the beverage (chicha) and food.’

Ethnographically, in the Peruvian Amazonia, local people also inhale in pairs using V-shaped tubes (Califano y Fernández Distel 1978), so that this practice became communal and acquired significant social connotations. This V-shaped instrument has the ambiguous feature of being both an insufflator and a pipe at the same time: while one end functions as the mouthpiece, the other, the one through which the powder is put, must be placed in one nostril.

THE LATE SNUFF COMPLEX

That is how Nuñez (1963) calls all evidence regarding this practice during the late pre-Incan or Incan periods, with possible extensions into European times. The Puna (Argentine High Steppes) and the Quebrada de Humahuaca acquire a special importance, when considering the ‘evolution’ of the trays. Archaeological items presented here were obtained from the Antigal de Peñas Blancas in Humahuaca. It is a

Two New Snuff Trays Found in the Humahuaca Region, Argentina

ruin of the late period (800 AD onwards) that has a significant Incan settlement (1470 AD or later). The physician Justiniano Torres Aparicio (1906-1992) was the one who carried out the task of extracting the items. Without making use of sophisticated excavation techniques, this collector could, nonetheless, recover many wooden artefacts, among which there were two snuff trays.

The other wooden artefacts —possibly associated with these— are: two spoons, the end of a tube with carvings, a little cylindrical stick, two big knives, and a cinch rope (tarabita). These were objects supposedly used by men. In the collection, it is also possible to observe a variety of associated wooden guide rings; some keep the axis of the spinning spindle, and some have labels that read ‘Antigal de Peñas Blancas’.

According to the International Nomenclature System of Archaeological Sites proposed by Rowe (1971), S Juj Hum 49 is the abbreviation that defines this semi urban community, located in the heart of the Quebrada de Humahuaca, on the Mapa Arqueológico del Departamento de Humahuaca (Humahuaca Department’s Archaeological Map; Fernández Distel 1983). The settlement is surrounded by rock art sites, quarries, old roads, qollcas or storage sites (Churque Aguada) and farming areas (Coctaca). It was even confirmed that a chief or leader, whose residence was characterized by having an unusual scenographic effect, lived in Peñas Blancas (Palma 1991).

In a subsequent work (1997), the above-mentioned author explains that these trays acted as ‘funerary accompaniments’ for chiefs or lords of the Humahuaca culture. This clarifies that trays were not deliberately manufactured to be placed into the grave; on the contrary, the ones found are extremely worn out and present an intense patina, indicating that they were regularly used by leaders or shamans.

Snuff trays that belong to this period of time do not have Tiawanaco iconography; instead, they seem to show a preference for zoomorphic or anthropomorphic uneven handles decorated with hollow, separated and quite large figures. As earlier trays (Tiawanaco or previous), they are set with turquoise stones (green malachite). According to Nuñez, the ones described here are type III —bird-like handle, condor-trays— and type VII —anthropomorphic, men standing or perhaps on their knees. Turquoise stones have disappeared from the trays, but it is possible to

observe the groove where they used to be set. Apart from that, the wood is extremely damaged.

Considering that wood is a scarce raw material in the region where the trays were found, its use is an indicator of apparently intense trading links during the late period or Desarrollos Regionales (Regional Developments) (sensu Raffino 1999). However, a survey on Peruvian keros (timbale-shaped jars) from Incan times showed that many of them were made of queñua (*Polylepis* sp.), a wood from the High Andean region, which is quite common in Jujuy. Wood was also obtained from trees such as chachacomos, cedars, guayacans, quebrachos, mahoganies, betulaceae and even palma-chontas (Carreras y Escalera 1998).

SEMIOTICS OF THE MOTIFS

This late snuff complex does not belong to mainstream cultures with coherent styles that derive from a dominant iconic model and entail specific forms of visualization: The Tiawanaco horizon is considered an example of this.

Here, we have the above-mentioned complex is found among people from the Puna (Casabindo culture) and human groups from the Quebrada (Humahuaca culture). The aesthetic and semiotic achievements of both cultures remain practically unknown because during the entire twentieth century there was not a systematic typologic research aiming at an interdisciplinary combination of historical, anthropological, aesthetic, semiotic and philosophical aspects. The refusal to propose an explanation for the pre-Columbian aesthetic productions from the Argentinian Northwest postponed the interpretations of carved or painted rock art. As regards mobile art, very few scholars are willing to study its aesthetic features because there are no conventional motifs and it is characterized by relief and sculpture (in shell, stone, wood and metal), generally thought for utilitarian reasons and manufactured in an extremely small size.

According to Sonderegger (1996), the plastic genre detectable in both trays is sculpture; the sub-genre is three-dimensional; the reason for being manufactured is utilitarian; the aesthetic mode is intimist; the style is naturalistic and figurative with marked expressionism; the object is a handled tray and the material is wood.

With respect to the human figure, there are details that relate to bronze pectoral plaques of the same period, and these plaques were found

approximately in the same ancient settlements (antigales) where the trays were discovered. The figure's sex is undetermined, and its head is big-sized since it takes up a third of the figure; it lacks a neck, but nevertheless the chin plays a prominent role; neither knees nor feet are observed. Our tablet has a hairdo or a cap, crenelated in the front and with three stripes in the rear. In addition, the body seems to be naked because, on the back, a horizontal fold can be observed at the level of the waist and a vertical one, in the area of the gluteus. The arms are in a normal and asymmetric anatomical position, in contrast to bronze pectoral silversmithing (Fernández Distel 1985).

The bird figure is thought to represent a condor because, although the head—a relevant indication for this kind of classification—is missing, a tray of this kind was noted in J. Berenguer's (1987:42) publication. It is illustrated in small size on the enclosed page. This type of tray is recognized as a category by L. Nuñez (1963) and it is clearly related to the item 506, which is showed here. In this small sculpture, there is a dialogue between full and empty spaces, the wood is bored through, but its mass is not destroyed. Besides, the fretwork enhances the 'light' or 'ethereal' characteristics of winged inhabitants from the Andean heights.

The condor-tray number 439289, which share the features of the handle with the item 506 described here, is preserved at the Museo Etnográfico J.B. Ambrosetti (Ethnographic Museum J.B. Ambrosetti) in Buenos Aires. Both objects also have the same measures.

Going back to C. Sonderegger (1996: 96-97), these two 'new' trays from Humahuaca are naturalistic artistic expressions (humanist naturalism), in which cosmic myths (the bird is a condor) and numerological rules (superstitious speculations connected with numbers two and three) can, nonetheless, be found.

About this, many writings have analysed number two—the double twins or the alter ego, the cosmogonic oppositions, etc.—and almost no attention has been paid to number three. Consequently, two possible reconstructions are showed on the illustration.

If the little men in the handle of tray number 511 were three, it would be necessary to search for data about the Incan cosmology with roots in more ancient times: In each quadrant of the empire there were nine ceques; these were

imaginary straight lines divided into three groups of three ceques each, which alternated the generic names of Collana, Payan and Cayao (Mariscotti 1978:83).

When offerings were given to the Pachamama (Mother Earth) in Jujuy during the mid-twentieth century, 'the imbibings are given to groups of two and of three people. A similar procedure is followed when aromatic substances and mineral powders are dedicated (Mariscotti 1978: 112).'

The symbology of number three could also refer to the Three Maries of the Orion equatorial constellation (Navamuel, personal communication). However, in general, it would be fruitful that these statements and the interpretations on Southern Andean art be sounder; for this to happen, we think it advisable to collect living material, to consider the region's natural way of thinking, and to avoid superficial readings and recitations of distant interpretations—as R. Kusch suggested in *América profunda*, 1986.

A SNUFF COMPLEX DATED WITH RADIOCARBON IN JUJUY, NW ARGENTINA

At this point, the issue of the so-called 'hombre de La Matanza' (La Matanza's Man) will be taken into consideration, although the site became known—and appears on the Mapa Arqueológico de Santa Catalina (Santa Catalina's Archaeological Map), Jujuy—as Santa Bárbara or S Juj Sca 24. The date was taken from the fabric of a stuffed body's funerary accompaniment (sensu Palma 1991: 45), which dates from 1420 AD (Kaup, Estpuller, Weser and Fernández Distel 1997). The tray measures 5.1 x 1.6 inches and it has a feline carving in the handle. The material, associated with anadenanthera powder, is exhibited in the Museo Arqueológico Provincial de Jujuy (Jujuy's Province Archaeological Museum).

This almost conventional width of 1.6 inches—the same width as in item 506—leads us to propose two possible reconstructions for the fragmented tray 511.

DESCRIPTIVE APPENDIX FOR THE TWO NEW TRAYS

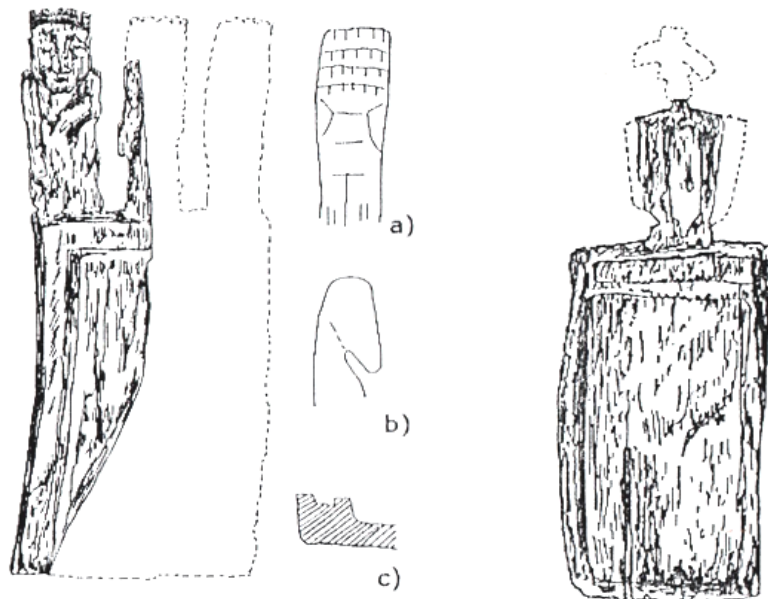
Item 511. Origin: Peñas Blancas. Current storage depository: Torres Aparicio's private museum in Humahuaca. Raw material: dark wood. Measures of the fragment (including the handle): 5 inches long, 1 inch wide, and 0.4

Two New Snuff Trays Found in the Humahuaca Region, Argentina

inches thick. State of preservation: The tray is longitudinally split and shows signs of wear in the preserved part.

Item 506. Origin, current storage depository and raw material: idem item 511. Measures of

the fragment (including the handle): 4.3 inches long, 1.6 inches wide, and 0.4 inches thick. State of preservation: the handle's bird-shaped head is missing; intense patina.



Left the item 511 and right the item 506

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to especially acknowledge Alicia Soria de Torres Aparicio for her hospitality and patience during 1998 and 1999 when we classified her collection.

REFERENCES CITED

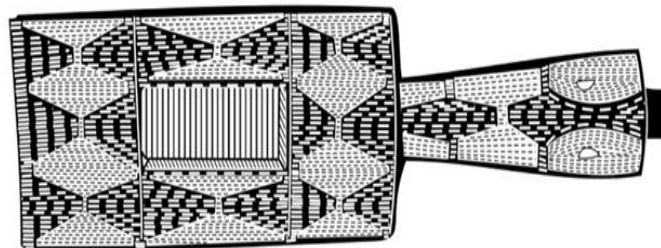
- [1] Berenguer, J. 1987. Consumo nasal de alucinógenos en Tiwanaku: una aproximación iconográfica. *Boletín del Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino* 2: 33-53.
- [2] Califano, M. y A.A. Fernández Distel 1978. L'emploi du tabac chez les Mashco de l'Amazonie Sud-Occidentale du Perou. *Bulletin de la Société Suisse des Americanistes* 42: 99-101.
- [3] Carreras Rivery R. y A. Escalera 1998. Identificación de las maderas de las vasijas de libación inca pertenecientes a la colección del Museo de América. *Anales Museo de América*, 6
- [4] Fernández Distel, A.A.
- [5] 1980. Hallazgo de pipas en complejos precerámicos del Borde de la Puna Jujeña y el empleo de alucinógenos por parte de las mismas culturas. *Estudios Arqueológicos* 5: 55-79.
- [6] 1983. Mapa Arqueológico de Humahuaca. *Supplementa (Scripta Ethnologica)* 4, 68 p.
- [7] 1985. Une nouvelle plaque décorée en bronze du Nord-Ouest Argentin. *Objets et Mondes* 25 (1-2): 37-42.
- [8] Kaup, Y., H. Estpuller, U. Weser y A. A. Fernández Distel 1997. Mumiefizierung durch dehydratation oder Einbalsamierung, ein biochemischer vergleich. Abstracts of the Meeting Archaometrie und Denkmalpflege (Vienna): 105.
- [9] Latcham, R. 1938 *Arqueología de la región Atacameña*. Prensa de la Universidad de Chile, Santiago de Chile.
- [10] Mariscotti, A.M. 1978. *Pachamama, santa tierra*. Gebr. Mann Verlag, Berlin
- [11] Mostny, G. 1958. Máscaras, tubos y tabletas para rapé y cabezas trofeos entre los atacameños. *Miscelanea Paul Rivet, octogenario dicata* 2: 379-392.
- [12] Nuñez, L. 1963. Problemas en torno a la tableta de rapé. *Congreso Internacional de Arqueología de San Pedro de Atacama, Anales de la Universidad del Norte* 2: 143-168.
- [13] Palma, J.
- [14] 1991. *Arquitectura Inca Provincial en Peñas Blancas, Quebrada de Humahuaca*. *Comechingonia* 7: 7-13. 1997. *Curacas y Señores, una visión de la sociedad política prehispánica en la Quebrada de Humahuaca*. Instituto Interdisciplinario Tilcara, Tilcara.
- [15] Raffino, R. 1998 *Las Tierras Altas del Noroeste*. En: *Nueva Historia de la Nación Argentina*, I, pp.83-108, Buenos Aires, Editorial Planeta.
- [16] Rowe, J. 1971. Site designation in the Americas. *American Antiquity* 36 (4): 477-481.
- [17] Sonderegger, C. 1996. *Diseño y arte precolombino, marco teórico*. Secretaría de Extensión Universitaria de la Facultad de Arquitectura y

Two New Snuff Trays Found in the Humahuaca Region, Argentina

- Urbanismo, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires.
- [18] Schultes, R. y A. Hofmann 1979. Plantas de los Dioses. Origen del uso de los alucinógenos. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México.
- [19] Torres, C. 1991. Snuff powders from the prehispanic San Pedro de Atacama: chemical and contextual analysis. *Current Anthropology* 32 (5): 640-649.
- [20] Uhle, M. 1915 Los tubos y tabletas de rapé en Chile. *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía* 5:114-136.
- [21] Wassen, H. 1967 Anthropological survey of the use of South America Snuff. *Ethnopharmacologic search for Psychoactive drugs Symposium Proceedings*, Public Health Service Publications 1645: 233-289.



Peñas Blancas (HUMAHUACA) the archaeological site, provenance of the two snuff trays



Inhalation tray of the Maué, Amazonas South America, in the Ethnological Museum Munich (Germany)

Citation: Alicia A. Fernández Distel, "Two New Snuff Trays Found in the Humahuaca Region, Argentina", *Annals of Archaeology*, vol. 2, no. 1. Pp28-33.2019.

Copyright: © 2019 Alicia A. Fernández Distel This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.