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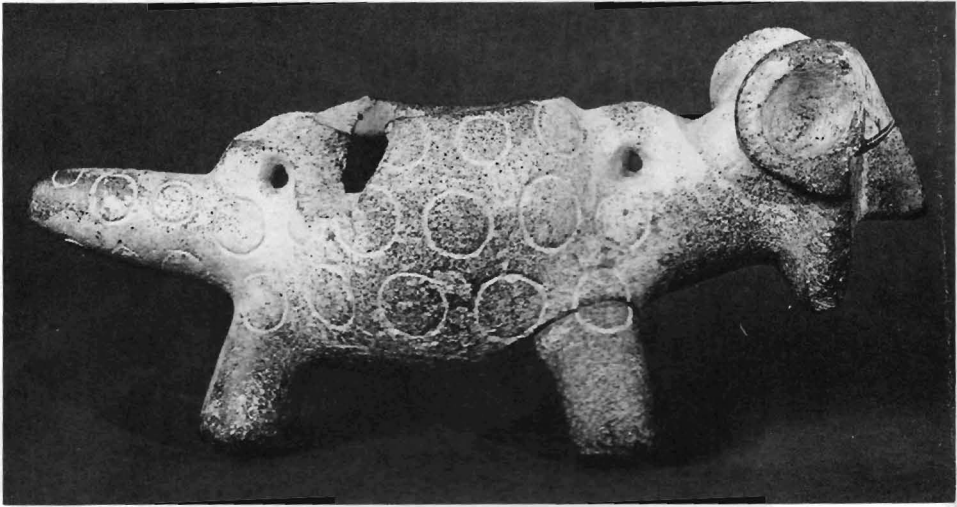


Fig. 1 (above) *Feline-human stone mortar from Tafti del Valle. Tafti Culture.*

Fig. 2 (below) *Condorhuasi negative-painted vase with a human modeled face on one end and a feline on the other. Hualfín Valley, Catamarca.*



The Felinic Complex in Northwest Argentina

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GENERALITIES

NORTHWEST Argentina is, from the geocultural point of view, an area peripheral to the nuclear center of Peru. We prefer "peripheral" rather than "marginal" because many of the influences which originated in the nuclear center were readapted to the new environmental and cultural media found here. Even when many of the original features can be recognized, it is clear that a great deal of change was involved which gave the cultures of northwest Argentina strong and definite personalities of their own.

We shall try to outline briefly the felinic complex through the archaeological iconography, showing the different cultures where this complex is found, some of the main items of the associated felinic context, and the temporal order of appearance. In a final summary we will point out the lines of change and evolution, and the main trend of the felinic representation and associated images.

The feline representation appears in different associated cultural complexes, which belong to different cultural levels. In the Sierras Centrales and in the Litoral, the feline image is found as a simple and more or less realistic representation. From the technological point of view and perhaps from the sociopolitical aspect, both regions appear less advanced than northwest Argentina. The feline appears depicted in rock paintings at Córdoba in a very simple way. In the Litoral the feline motif is found modeled on simple pottery. In northwest Argentina, the felinic iconography is part of a more complex society, which also had more technical possibilities (metals, pottery, stone carving) and more highly developed artistic forms associated with other complex groups of symbolic representations. The complexity of the cultural contexts and associated images suggests the existence of a cult where the feline or feline-like figures played an important role.

Before analyzing the iconography of the felinic complex, it is important to take a quick look at the periodification of the archaeological sequence used by the archaeolo-



gists working in northwest Argentina, together with the relationship existing between this area and the cultures which developed in the nuclear centers of the Andes. Since there is no evidence of the Chavín Horizon in northwest Argentina, the possibilities of using the Andean horizons to build up a periodification are reduced to the Tiahuanacoid and Inca influences present in this area. We are here mainly concerned with agricultural and pottery-making cultures. These are usually divided in this area into three main periods: Early, Middle, and Late. We have been using this system as an operational tool for lack of a better periodification based on sociopolitical grounds. This latter type cannot possibly be constructed now because of our scanty archaeological knowledge of the Argentine northwest. The Aguada culture, which extends from A.D. 650 to 850 (González 1961), marks the beginning and the end of the Middle Period; therefore, we consider as Early those cultures which developed before the appearance of Aguada. Those that developed after Aguada and until the Inca conquest are considered Late. The felinic iconography achieved its richest expressions from the Early Period through the end of the Middle Period.

EARLY PERIOD

The main cultures of the Early Period are Tafí, Condorhuasi, Ciénaga, Alamito, Candelaria, and Saujil. The felinic complex exists mainly in Tafí and Condorhuasi.

Tafí

The geographical setting of this culture is the Tafí Valley in the western part of the Tucumán province (González and Núñez Regueiro 1961). Five radiocarbon datings and some cross-checkings place the beginnings of Tafí around the first century of our era, and the end around A.D. 500-600.

The most important manifestations of the Tafí complex are found in its stone carvings. The pottery of the Tafí culture is poor, mainly utilitarian and undecorated, so no kind of figurative iconography has survived. Contrasting with this poor pottery art, we find the following very rich expression in the stone carvings of the Tafí culture: A. realistic felinic stone sculptures; B. stylized felines; C. feline-human figures, as seen in Figure 1, which represents a sort of mortar with felinic circular spots, tail, and legs, and a human head with a band on the forehead; D. monoliths, some of which could be felinic representations, such as the one from El Mollar (Bruch 1911: 6, ill.).

Some important features of the Tafí culture are the existence of artificial mounds, around which these monoliths or stone pillars were found, and stone enclosures with monoliths at their centers, or stone enclosures with pillars at their entrances (Bruch 1911: 3). All these elements suggest the existence of a quite complicated ceremonialism in which the feline played an important role.

Besides the cultural items we have mentioned, it is necessary to include the use of copper and gold, stone masks, etc.

Condorhuasi-Alamito

The geographical center of Condorhuasi culture is the Hualfín Valley (González 1956) in Catamarca province, but its manifestations are found as far as Laguna Blanca in the north and San Juan province in the south. Two main phases of this culture are recognized. The older dates back to the beginnings of the Christian era; the second phase ends around A.D. 250-300.

The felinic complex appears in the second phase of Condorhuasi culture, according to the data now available. The felinic figures are found in the following artifacts:

A. The pottery art of Condorhuasi was very rich, with polychromed effigy vases or more simple types painted with one or two colors. The modeled figures are sometimes realistic, sometimes fantastic; but the modeling is always of a high quality. We observe realistic modeled feline figures, stylized modeled felines, and a mixture of feline-human features. There are some cases in which naturalistic human and feline figures are represented in the same vase, one at each end (Fig. 2). Sometimes the human figure may be realistically modeled, but it adopts a felinic attitude in its



Fig. 3 *Condorhuasi plain pottery vessel.*
Belén, Catamarca. Instituto
Torouato Di Tella.

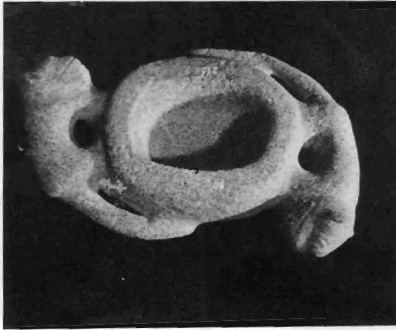


Fig. 4 Three stone pieces of the Condorhuasi culture. Top and center: shallow mortars with feline figures around the center. Bottom: a mortar or container with feline and feline-human figures.

squatting position. Others show a human figure on the back of a modeled feline (Fig. 3). Some other very peculiar vases are those that, when viewed from one side, show a feline figure in squatting position; if seen from the front, they show a human being.

B. Gold, silver, and copper were employed by the Condorhuasi smiths. One excellent specimen is a gold pectoral with six feline heads in profile.

C. Stone sculpture reproduced the same representations seen in pottery, some of

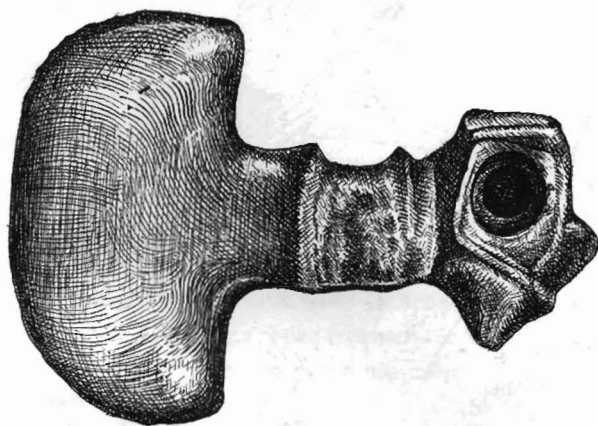


Fig. 5 Stone axe with a carved feline-human figure.

them of excellent manufacture from the artistic as well as the workmanship point of view (Fig. 4). There are stone double mortars (which were perhaps some kind of ceremonial containers), on whose sides are carved feline or anthropomorphic figures; figures with double heads, one feline and one human; or figures with a mixture of feline and human features. Shallow containers ornamented with feline or anthropomorphic figures have also been found. Sometimes the carvings represent feline figures with human trophy heads. Other representations of human-feline features are found in the heads of stone axes (Fig. 5). The mortars and containers suggest that hallucinogenic drugs were used.

Burial practices also suggest the important role of the feline in the ritual. One tomb found in Belén, Catamarca, has as funerary offerings two couples modeled in polychrome pottery, one of them a naturalistic human couple, the other a jaguar couple.

According to all this information, there is no doubt that the feline played a very important role in the Condorhuasi religious ideas, and also in the ritual practices. In the Alamito culture (González and Núñez Reguerio 1958-59), which is very close to Condorhuasi, there are also figures associated with the feline complex. A carved stone figure of a woman with a feline-like form on its back (*alter ego*) was found between two stone platforms. At the base of this sculpture, which is one meter high, a shallow container, possibly an offering vase, was found.

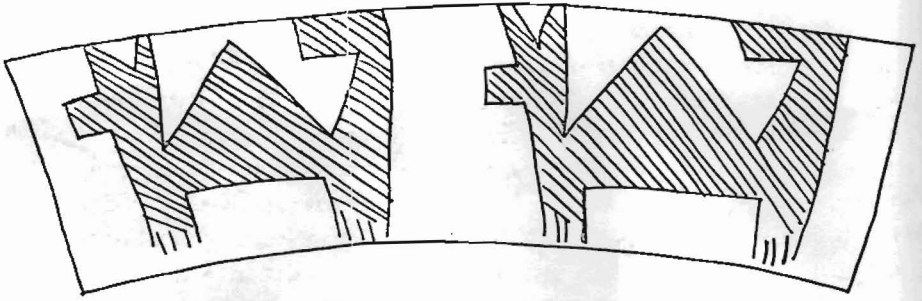


Fig. 6 *Incised design on a Ciénaga gray vase.*

La Ciénaga

The Ciénaga culture has a geographic distribution similar to that of Condorhuasi, but it is more extended in some places, such as the Abaucán Valley, and its remains are more abundant and frequently found. The Ciénaga culture is subdivided into three main phases, from A.D. 250–300 to A.D. 650.

The feline complex is mainly depicted on pottery. One of the main features is that it is possible to follow the evolution and change of the simple feline representation to more complex figures that have been called “draconian.” As we will see, the change and evolution appear mostly because of the progressive arrival of external influences coming from the north.

The pottery of Ciénaga I lacks figurative designs, so no felines appear on it; the vases are decorated with geometric patterns incised on the surface of a gray or black ware.

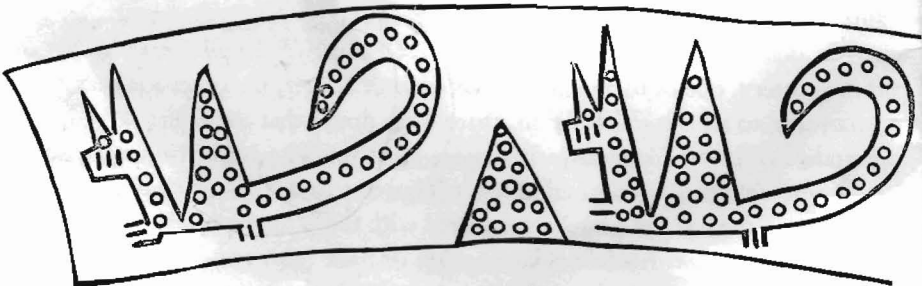


Fig. 7 *Incised design on a Ciénaga gray vase.*

In Ciénaga II, the figurative elements reappear; the feline now looks llamalike, and is drawn in a sketchy and rigid fashion, with straight lines. Perhaps these figures, as well as human representations or other geometric patterns depicted the same way, are textile-derived. Starting with these simple, straight-line figures, we can follow the changes and progressive evolution toward more and more complicated felinic figures, up to the complex "dragonlike" figures found in the Aguada culture (see Figs. 6 and 7). At the beginning, the feline figures are distinguished by their straight and pointed ears, rectangular or triangular body, and simple tail. In the following step, it is possible to see the appearance of protruding claws, and prominent lines of teeth; all of the figures look forward. In a more advanced step, the head is turning back, the legs and tail are curved, the simple straight lines are replaced by a more frequent use of curved lines. The use of circular design representation of the feline spot is more and more frequent. The associated human figures follow similar steps of increasing complexity. To the

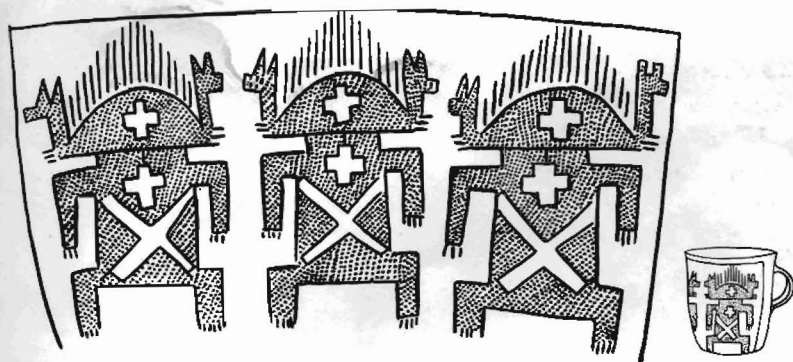


Fig. 8 *Ciénaga gray incised vase with simple human figures with two felinic headdresses.*

sketchy simple images with rectangular heads and bodies and vertical lines over the forehead representing hair, some felinic headdresses are now added (Fig. 8).

In Ciénaga III, the increasing complexity in pottery designs shows, on the whole, a clear transition to the Aguada culture. The felinic figures are also found in some other cultural items. The clay smoking pipes carry fantastic human or feline modeled images. Frequently the plastic images are placed opposite one another on the pipe bowl. One of the two figures can be human, the other feline. The exceptional and elaborate character of these pipes, found in tombs, suggests a ceremonial use. Some more or less realistic feline representations in effigy vessels are found in Ciénaga. They are also clear influences from Condorhuasi (González 1954: 90).



Fig. 9 Carved figures on stone vessels. Top: a bird-masked human. Bottom: "the sacrificer." Late Ciénaga or Early Aguada.



Some stone vessels are also found in some Ciénaga III tombs. These vessels seem to be copies of similar wooden vases found in San Pedro de Atacama during Tiahuanaco times. Some of these vessels have realistic feline carvings or human representations on the rims or on the sides. In one case, a human figure wears a feline or a bird mask; in others, it is the so-called "sacrificer"—a character with a human trophy head in one hand and an ax in the other (Fig. 9).

Metals were widely used in Ciénaga times; chisels, ax blades, and tweezers are the main implements, and ornaments (Fig. 10) were also made. Some of the axes have feline representations. These are the same axes represented in the "sacrificer" motif.

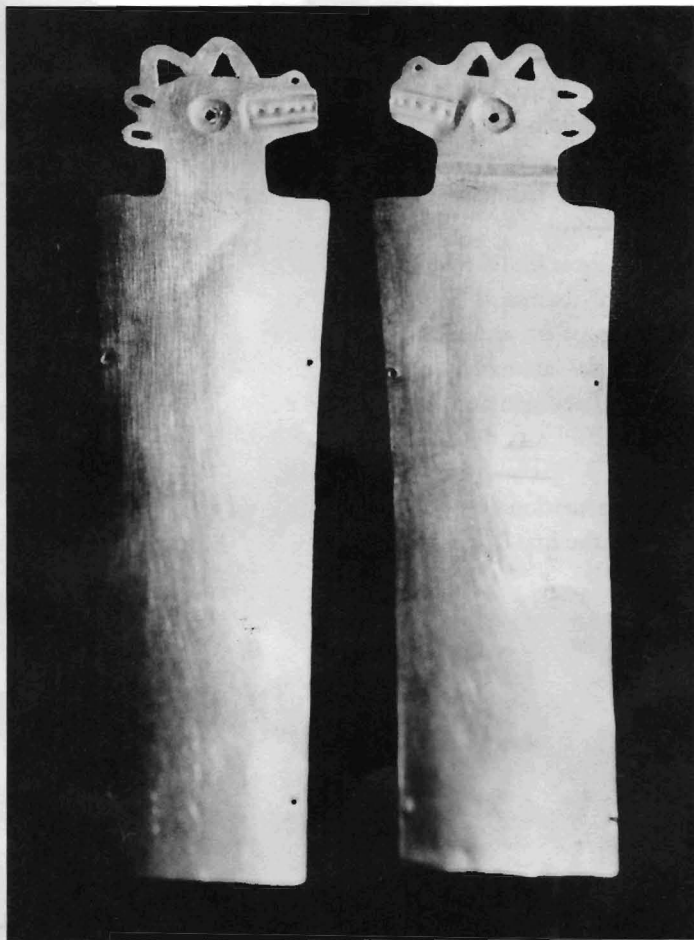


Fig. 10 Gold ornaments of *Ciénaga* sculpture with feline heads. Photograph Humberto Rivas, Instituto Torouato Di Tella.

Thus we may deduce that they were, in fact, used in human sacrifices, for obvious religious purposes; so the feline played an important or main role in the ceremonialism and religion of these peoples. The warrior figures, with complicated headdresses, and the decorated smoking pipes formed part of the ritualistic ceremonies of the feline complex.

LA AGUADA

The iconography of the feline and associated elements reaches the peak in frequency and in artistic and technological development in the Aguada culture. From the point of view of pottery and metallurgy, Aguada is the most elaborate culture of northwest Argentina. It is also the hallmark of the periodification actually in use, because it marks the Middle Period.

The Aguada culture is found from the Calchaquí Valley to the north of San Juan province; but its distribution is uneven. In Santa María its appearance is sporadic; great concentrations of its archaeological remains are found in the Abaucán and Hualfín Valleys, in the Catamarca Valley, and north of La Rioja. To the east it reached the western part of Tucumán and Santiago del Estero. The actual dating—based on carbon-14—ranges from A.D. 650 to 850, but lately some deviant datings have fallen off these limits.

The feline representation has been found in all technological media: pottery, metals, bone, etc. In the first case, abundant images of the feline are found in the gray



Fig. 11 *Stone spindle-whorl of Aguada culture representing a feline head.* Photograph Humberto Rivas, Instituto Torouato Di Tella.



Fig. 12 *Late Ciénaga or Early Aguada stone vessel with a felinic figure in relief.*
Photograph Humberto Rivas, Instituto Torouato Di Tella.

engraved pottery, as well as in the painted kind, in its bichrome and polychrome types. We will make a further analysis of the motifs. Metal ax blades have been found with a more or less realistic felinic engraving on their surfaces, or a mixture of feline-human creatures. There are also silhouettes of the feline, or of the "dragonlike" feline, represented on the part of the blade opposite the edge. Another felinic representation appears on the surface of pectorals, as can be seen in the famous "Lafone Quevedo's Disk," which has a central figure flanked by two felines. Wood material has been only poorly preserved in northwest Argentina, so very few specimens have survived; the only wooden piece that we believe belonged to Aguada is an ax handle with a "sacrificer" carved on one end, adorned with a rich headdress of felinic motifs. In bone there are some rectangular spindle whorls of small carvings decorated with felinic motifs (Fig. 11).

Stone sculpture has disappeared by the time of Aguada; the only stone carvings are found in vessels belonging to Transitional Ciénaga or Early Aguada, and are similar to those already mentioned for Ciénaga (Fig. 12).

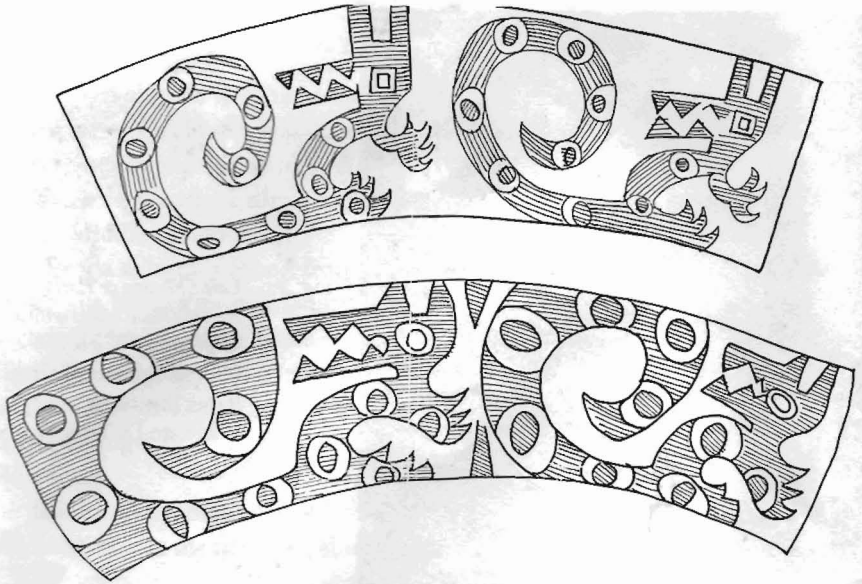


Fig. 13 *Felinic representation on an incised gray Aguada vase.*

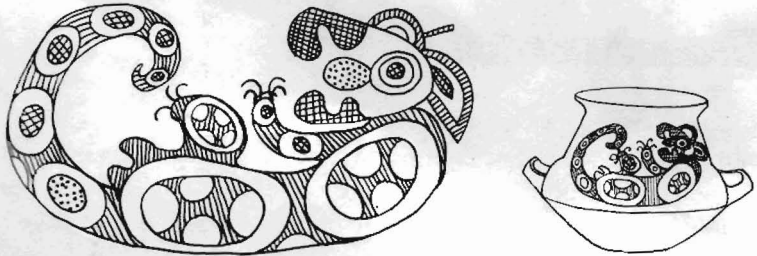


Fig. 14 *Gray Aguada vase incised with a felinic figure lying on its back.*

The ceremonialism of Aguada seems to be quite developed. Artificial mounds and some prepared surfaces on hilltops with stairways and small structures are found (González 1961), all of which speak in favor of this ceremonialism.

The feline or "dragon," as it is called by some Argentine archaeologists, is also found on several other items, such as the face painting on some characters depicted in pottery; in small objects of daily use, such as stone or bone spindle whorls; on spear-thrower handles; in the designs of pottery; and some kinds of helmets or hats worn by warriors have one or more of these feline representations.

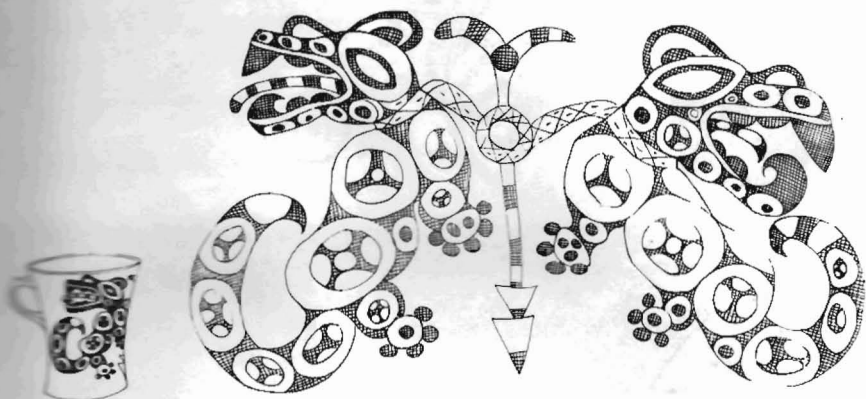


Fig. 15 Two felines united by a "collar" and a dart or lance.

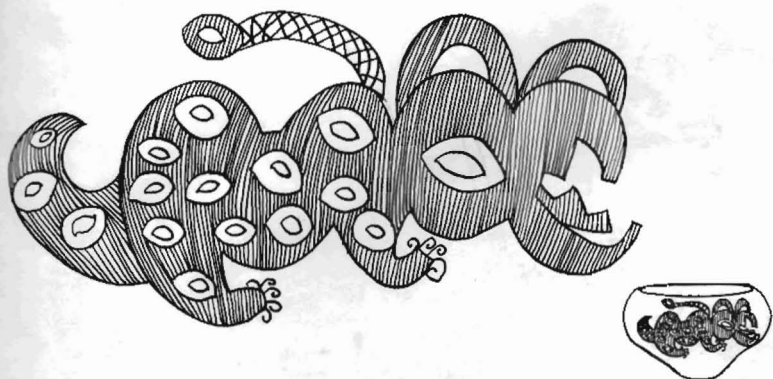


Fig. 16 Aguada gray incised vase.

A special paragraph must be dedicated to the different aspects offered by the felinic figure—a really polymorphic representation. Among the best known we find: A. realistic felines, which are apparently of late appearance in the Aguada culture, contrary to what was previously supposed (Serrano 1943); B. semi-realistic figures, similar to the above-mentioned but with some added features like jaws or crested noses (Figs. 13, 14, 15, 16); C. fantastic or dragonlike figures, such as the multiheaded feline (Fig.

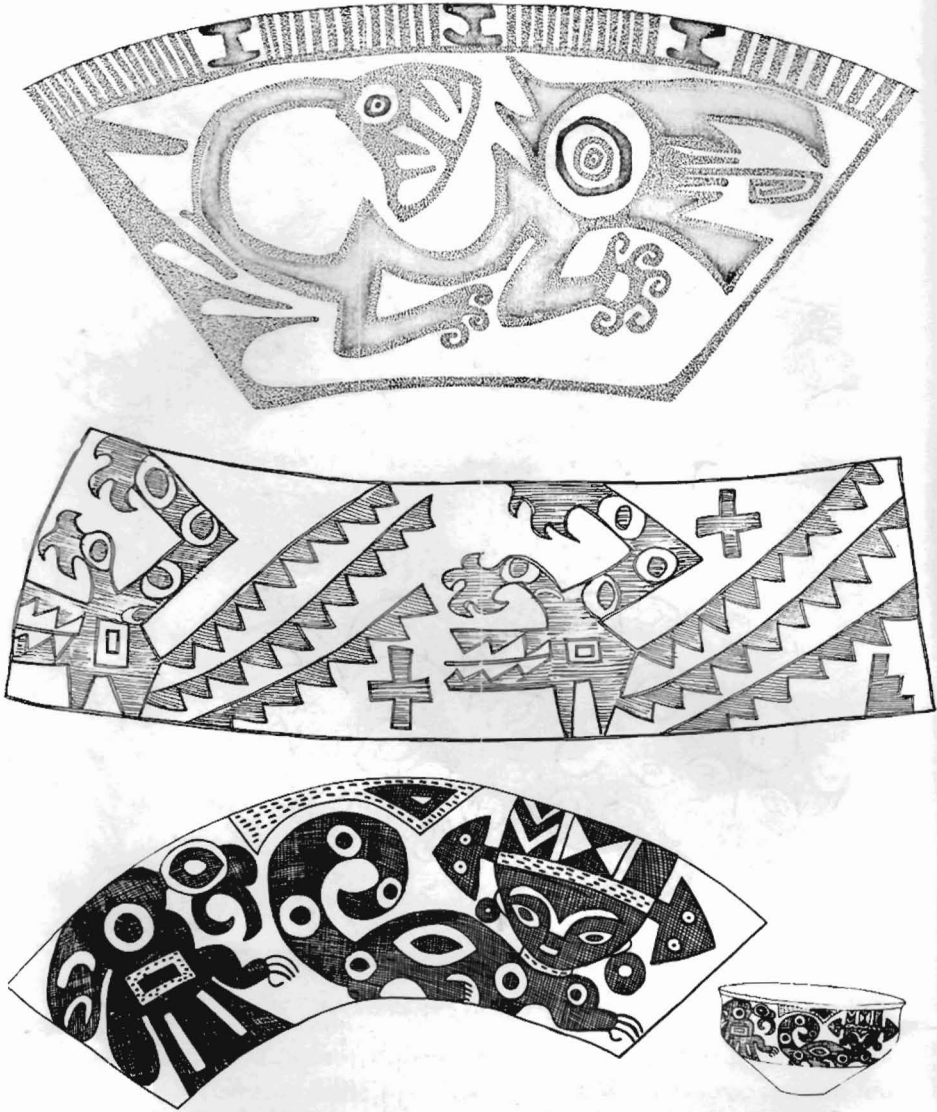


Fig. 17 (top) *Multihead feline. Aguada polychrome vase.*

Fig. 18 (center) *"Crowned" feline. Aguada gray incised vase.*

Fig. 19 (bottom) *Feline figure with human head. Aguada gray incised vase.*

17), which presents several variations, one of them with a snakelike body and feline head; D. "crowned" felines (Fig. 18); E. heteromorphic, or mixture of, feline features, such as claws, body, tails, spots, with a human head (Figs. 19 and 20).



Fig. 20 *Feline with a human head. Aguada polychrome vase.*

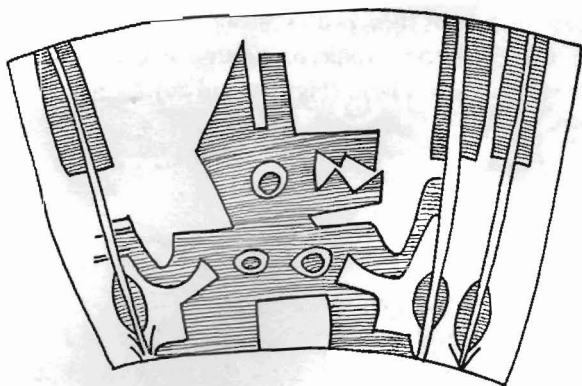


Fig. 21 Figure of a warrior with feline mask. Aguada incised gray vase.

The figures associated with the feline are:

Snakes. They are found alone or mixed with feline attributes like spots, heads, etc. The double-headed snake (*anfisbema*) is also found depicted on Aguada pottery.

Toads. Isolated figures of toads are quite rare. Sometimes they include feline spots, claws, or legs.

Birds. There is only one known case of a bird figure with extended wings and a feline head. There is also some mixing of fantastic birds with human heads, extended wings, feline claws, and associated trophy heads.

Monkeys. These are quite rare, but have appeared in an unmistakable way. It should be pointed out that there are no monkeys in this region.

Human figures. There is quite a realistic skill in modeling human features on Aguada effigy vessels. More frequently, however, human figures are engraved or painted on vessel surfaces.

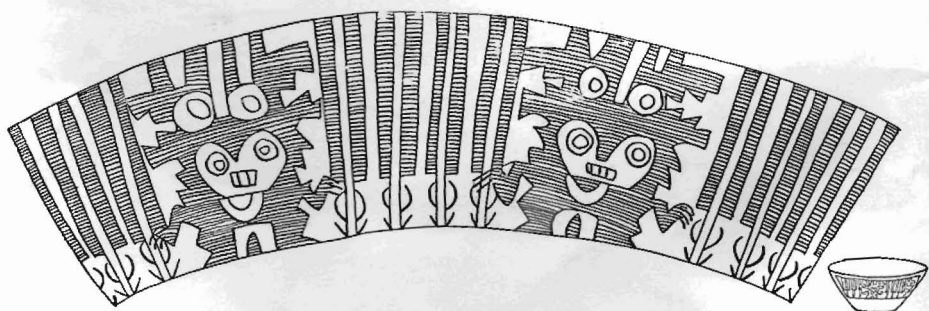


Fig. 22 Two warriors with double feline headdress. Aguada gray incised vase.

The human figures depicted are of different kinds: *warriors*, with rich headdresses, carrying weapons in their hands, mainly spearthrowers and darts; the *two-scepter character*, well known in the Andean area; the *sacrificer character*, a warrior with an ax in one hand and a trophy head in the other; *warriors with felinic masks*; *human figures with felinic attributes*; *felinic figures with tattooed faces*, *felinic spots*, *felinic jaws*, *incurved crests as nose ornaments* (Figs. 21, 22, 23).

COMPARISONS AND ORIGINS

The preceding paragraphs have sketched the appearance of the felinic complex in northwest Argentina around the beginnings of the Christian era, starting in the Early Period of the pottery-making cultures, with the Tafi-Alamito-Condorhuasi cultures. The climax, decadence, and disappearance of the felinic complex occurs with the Aguada culture, around A.D. 850; Ciénaga represents a transitional span between the beginning and the end.



Fig. 23 *Aguada modeled effigy vessel in shape of a human figure in squatting position with two felines incised on its flanks.*

The felinic complex undergoes a great deal of variation from its first to its last moments, especially in the formal means of expression and in its frequency. We wonder in which way the differences in technology operated to produce these different appearances. As we pointed out in dealing with Tafi-Condorhuasi-Alamito, stone sculpture and stone carvings are the most frequent media for the feline iconography until the appearance of Condorhuasi polychrome pottery. On the other hand, in Aguada, pottery is the most common and richest means by which the iconography has survived. Nevertheless, the two central themes of this iconography, human and feline images, or their combination, have a basic unity throughout the whole sequence. In Tafi the feline complex is represented mainly in stone sculpture: monoliths, stone containers with relief sculptures, etc. Since the pottery has no decoration, no traces of the feline have been recovered from it. In Condorhuasi, later than Tafi, the feline complex appears not only in stone sculpture but also in pottery effigy vessels. It is also found in gold *répoussé* plaques; but these last are valuable exceptional objects, perhaps reserved for the chief or priest.

One of the main features of the felinic iconography at this moment is the *dualistic* aspect of the feline-human conception. Both figures recognize different degrees of mixture and different means of formal expression. This dualistic quality can be seen in the pottery vessels, as well as in the stone mortars and containers. The dual concept, human-feline or feminine-masculine, results in a new "unity," as can be seen in different instances: A. in effigy vessels in which one of the ends is a feline and the other a human being, both modeled in a more or less realistic way so that the body of the vase is the union of both concepts (exactly the same thing is observed in stone containers, mortars, and smoking pipes); B. in new fantastic figures created by mixing feline and human traits; C. in naturalistic human figures with felinic attitudes—the characteristic squatting position—or felinic attributes; D. by associating in the same tomb a representation of a pair of human beings modeled in ceramics and a pair of effigy vessels with jaguar couples.

Condorhuasi disappeared around A.D. 250-300, and was replaced by Ciénaga. At its beginnings, and from the technological point of view, Ciénaga is not so well developed as Condorhuasi. Along with the disappearance of Condorhuasi, stone sculpture largely ceased. The ceramic effigy vessels with their skillful modeling were replaced by a decorative tradition of figures incised on vessel surfaces. There is no doubt that this technological change vigorously influenced the iconography, and that the felinic complex survived and little by little recovered its former importance, along the different steps of the evolution of Ciénaga.

Aguada culture shared many cultural traits with Ciénaga and Condorhuasi, but in the former the feline complex acquired many features of its own. In the Hualfín

Valley, the evolution from Ciénaga to Aguada is quite clear, but the persistence of Condorhuasi traits—mainly as pottery shapes—which are not found in Ciénaga, suggests that, in some place in the northwest, a Condorhuasi tradition survived without many changes until Aguada times.

Since a good deal of stone sculpture had disappeared by Aguada times, our main source of iconographic documents is furnished by pottery and metals. In Aguada the felinic complex reached its climax; the feline cult and ceremonies associated with it achieved their maximum development; diversification of the motifs and associated figures was at its peak. The warrior/trophy-head/feline trilogy shared part of a religious structure that, even though we cannot understand it in its details, possessed an iconography so rich that it speaks for itself. The elements depicted on the surface of the vases are repeated again and again, and show a high degree of stability in their formal appearance; no doubt their symbolic meaning was clear to the people of Aguada, even though it is obscure to us.

The importance of a religious cult in the cultures of the Early and Middle Periods is seen in the fact that only in these cultures do we find traces of real ceremonial centers, such as the artificial mound of Tafí, surrounded as it is by monoliths, or the *allpataucas* or mounds of Aguada, and its ceremonial centers on the hilltops. This kind of ceremonial center has not been found in the cultures of the Late Period.

One important question, especially when we try to relate the feline complex of northwest Argentina to similar manifestations in the rest of the Andean area, is: did this complex originate in this region, or did it arrive fully developed? I will not try to solve the problem of the origins of the feline cult or complex in the nuclear center of the Andes. This problem is beyond the scope of this paper, but I think that a few words concerning the area under study would be of interest, especially if someone decides to take on the task of making a comparative study of the feline complex on the continent.

Tafí appears as a fully developed culture with a high degree of technological skill in stone carving, house building, sculptural art, and metallurgy. We do not know other local predecessors for Tafí. In Condorhuasi the same thing happens, except for the elements that it received from the preceding Tafí tradition. The Tafí material culture (monoliths, stone carving, settlement pattern) points to the Bolivian Altiplano and to the Titicaca Basin as the main source of cultural origins. Also, the main food sources, such as quinoa, the microthermic tuber, and the llama, are all believed to have had their center of domestication in the Altiplano (González y Pérez 1968). All of these elements were readapted to the new ecological conditions of northwest Argentina, thus giving birth to cultures with a high degree of personality, in which traces of their origins had not totally faded.

By the time of Ciénaga I, at its very beginning, some elements differing from the Andean tradition appeared, obscuring the feline complex; but afterwards, step by step, the felinic images and accompanying complex achieved again their main iconographic expression, reaching their climax in Aguada. Even when a high degree of local evolution is evident for the felinic and associated elements, it is also possible to establish that the inspiration of some trend in that change has its source in another place. We have discussed this matter elsewhere (González 1961), pointing out the influences coming from San Pedro de Atacama, which in turn had been influenced by Tiahuanaco at different moments. Many items, such as the two-scepter character (*personaje de los dos cetros*), sacrificer (*sacrificador*), two-feline headdress, sacrificer with felinic mask, as well as the use of bronze, etc., show the influences arriving from the north, via San Pedro. The active interchange between that locality and the Hualfin Valley is beyond doubt because of the frequent finding of Aguada pottery sherds in San Pedro de Atacama. Since the time we pointed out these influences, much additional evidence has accumulated. Thus the conclusion is that the main ideas related to the felinic complex could be traced to the San Pedro sources, where the felinic complex is well represented, especially in the so-called "*complejo del rapé*," or wooden paraphernalia for hallucinogenic drugs. While agreeing that the main source in relation to the felinic complex came from outside, it is also possible that these ideas were greatly changed and readapted to the preexistent local technical means of expression, and that many iconographic themes of the felinic complex were locally reelaborated to reach a new formal expression quite different from the original ones. Nevertheless, the original ideas behind the original themes have such a continuity that they can be perfectly recognized.

We have no ethnohistorical sources of any kind that could be linked with the original feline complex, only some folkloric legends found in northwest Argentina that refer to felinic man (*el hombre tigre* or *runa-uturunca*), but this is very little indeed when compared with what we know about the felinic complex from archaeological sources. This complex disappeared along with Aguada culture. Some reminiscences may be seen in the iconography of the Late Period, especially in the Santa María culture, but these are far from the richest figurative elements of Aguada.

From the point of view of stylistic evolution, it is quite interesting to observe how the llamalike felines evolve from very simple and stylized forms to naturalistic felines, and also to a complicated and "dragonlike" fantastic figure. On the whole, northwest Argentina shows, in the iconography of a theme very well known in some of the high cultures of the Central Andes, a very rich expression, beyond what we might have expected from such a peripheral area.



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