

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Tafi Valley (Argentine Northwest): Rethinking the Local Positions in the Global Context of SXV

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Abstract:

Tafi's situation in the context of Inca politics is particular, because of its marked eastern position in relation to other sites from Argentina's northwest. The region is characterized by the total absence of architectural and structural patterns responding to the Inca standards, in contrast with a lot of pottery of Inca styles. The archaeological site more representative of this is called Pucara de las Lomas Verdes.

The archaeological record indicates that the Inca presence did not apparently respond to a centralized administration in this frontier place. Quite on the contrary, it is from this local place that positions are negotiated in relation to imperial interests, having local hierarchical groups as main protagonists.

Keywords: *inca - Eastern border – Pucará de las Lomas Verdes - local hierarchical groups - negotiation*

1. Introduction

The way in which the Tafi Valley was incorporated into the Inca sphere of influence during the final stage of pre-Columbian history has been questioned lately. A distinct aspect of this area is that it does not respond to what archaeological literature has defined as typical Inca features, especially regarding structure (diagnostic architectural features, space organization). However, the presence of pottery pieces and metals from these moments suggests that this region was indeed affected by the complex social and political processes occurring after the Inca occupation of the Argentine NW region.

Inca presence in Tafi is one of the most easterly points recorded in Argentina's NW territory [1]. Until recently, the latest reference was Hyslop's [2], who recorded their presence in Santiago del Estero, based on the maps developed by Urteaga [3], Regal [4] and Hagen [5], along with Pärssinen [6]. It is apparent that the jungle territories even farther east were not incorporated to the Inca State apparatus, being occupied by lules and chiriguano populations [7].

In the past few years, steps taken in solving border-related conflicts of State occupations have evidenced a reformulation of the classical perspectives of strongly disciplined spaces, on the basis of interpretations which take into account the organizational characteristics of local populated centers in the configuration of Inca spaces. The degree of defense deployed against bordering territories, along with the existence or lack of impact and modification of the local social, political and economic processes caused by the installation of a centralized administration, have apparently been solved in different ways in each of the border territories.

A great part of the research on the situation of the Inca border is based on the ethno-historical model, which centers upon the relevance of militarized spaces, designed to overpower resistance and prevent and stop attacks by groups not belonging in the State [8]. The defense of the border areas would have developed through the installation of garrisons, the relocation of populations and the reinforcement of security in the most dangerous points. It is possible that the frontline was intensely fortified, with defensive activity marking a clear distinction between inner and foreign territory, or by the establishment of nodal points connected by paths [9, 10]. In this respect, Hyslop [2] highlights the importance of roads in connecting the different military facilities to the territories annexed to Imperial politics.

A different model, based mainly on the Roman Empire approach to their relation with some of their conquered territories, considers these spaces as areas of fluent interaction, characterized by alliances with local populations, tight bonds with the native elites and even economic exchanges [11 cited in 12]. This is called a cultural border. In this scenario, it would not be surprising to find the following scenario: "...minimal direct imperial interference in local patterns and institutions, and relationships of the empire with local populations should be rooted in social and economic processes rather than in centralized administration" ([12]:391). Thus, negotiations and alliances would be central to the relation between the State and local actors, favoring the control of the territory by local groups. From an archaeological perspective, this would entail fortifications built and managed by the local populations in their own styles.

In her research on the Orochontu and Cuzcotuyo (Bolivia) regions, Alconini [12] finds an intermediate point between the military and the cultural models. The region shows investment in defensive infrastructure, but rather than being strongly fortified, it is a "minor military perimeter", while the socio-economical patterns prior to the Inca presence remain unaltered.

These notions lead us to consider the possibility that the Tafi Valley may represent a border space, even if the most clearly Inca-related architectural characteristics are not present.

2. Tafi Valley

The Tafi Valley represented a space of significant relevance for pre-Hispanic human settlements. Due to its location, it articulates two geographically different spaces: the arid western valleys, with warm-temperate weather, and the eastern plains, with warm and humid weather, characterized by woods and jungles. It is comprised by an intermontane basin, 2000 m.a.s.l., located at the eastern border of the valley-montane region, splitting up two important mountain systems: the Cumbres Calchaquies to the north and the Aconquija sierras to the south [13, 14] (Figure 1).

Archaeological evidence yields the presence of an important occupation, both in spatial and chronological terms [1, 15]. While the stone architectural remains of the forming societies seem to be the local sociocultural referent, there is an ever growing number of late quadrangular depressions, along with pottery pieces from these moments and from the Inca expansion period. The first works of archeological research are mostly descriptive in nature and they center upon the monoliths which characterized Tafi's archaeology. From then on, research has been mainly oriented to the study of the Formative Period (0-900 DC). This period is represented by a local archaeological "culture" called "Tafi" [16], marked by a particular form of settlement known as "daisy-shaped pattern", comprised by an inner circle destined to domestic and funeral activities, to which smaller circles were attached, serving as rooms or deposits [17]. These types of architectural patterns are associated with the rock monoliths known as "menhires". The situation of the Valley following the Tafi occupation is debated. Some researchers posit that the area was depopulated for almost two hundred years, after which the Santa María and Inca occupations took place [18]. Others suggest a prevalence of Tafi groups associated to the constructive characteristics of neighboring groups [19], such as those from the Santa María valley, in western Catamarca.

The Late Period is architecturally represented by depressed rectangular structures which apparently functioned as domestic spaces, known in archaeological bibliography as "pit-houses", profusely spread in the Valley [13, 20, 21]. It is further associated with the presence of pottery work typical of late moments in neighboring regions such as semiarid western valleys —Santa María, Belén, Fambalasto—, which suggests the existence of complex social processes extending into later moments [22, 23].

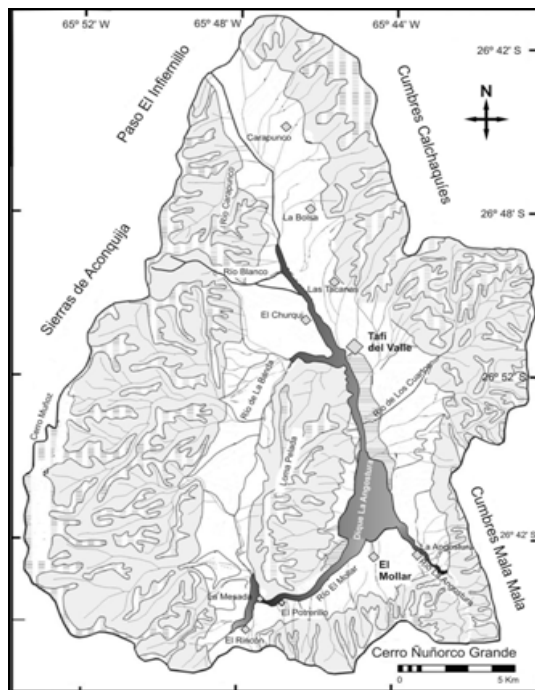


Figure 1: Tafi Valley (Tucumán, Argentina)

3. INCA Presence in Tafi

Tafi's situation in the context of Inca politics is particular, because of its marked eastern position in relation to other sites from Argentina's northwest (Figure 2). A notable aspect of the region is the recurring presence of pottery pieces more strongly related to the State, in contrast with the almost total absence of architectural and structural patterns responding to the Inca standards. In addition, it was not possible to identify road traces, which typically define the traffic trends and the connections between facilities which need to be intercommunicated [24].

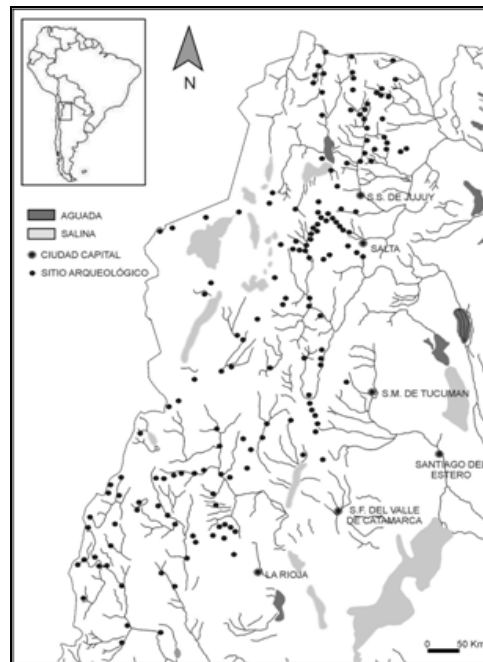


Figure 2: Map of distribution of Inca archaeological sites, after Raffino [54]
On the east are the Santiago del Estero and Tucumán provinces.

The area with the strongest Inca presence is the site known as El Pucará de Las Lomas Verdes [14, 25, 26, 27]. Located in a hill that overpowers the visual landscape of the Valley, its architectural features correspond to the Late Period (900-1480 DC), with a higher area, mostly plain, and further lower areas to the east, west and south. It comprises closed structures—whose shapes range from circular to sub-circular, quadrangular and sub-quadrangular—and open structures, surrounded by perimeter walls in the low area. The walls of the rooms were constructed with granite blocks of different shapes and sizes, without using a mortar [25]. The limited topography of the area, whose access is strongly restricted by its marked height and steep slopes, makes it stand as a strategic location from which visual control could be vastly exerted on the neighboring areas [14, 25, 26, 27] (Figure 3).

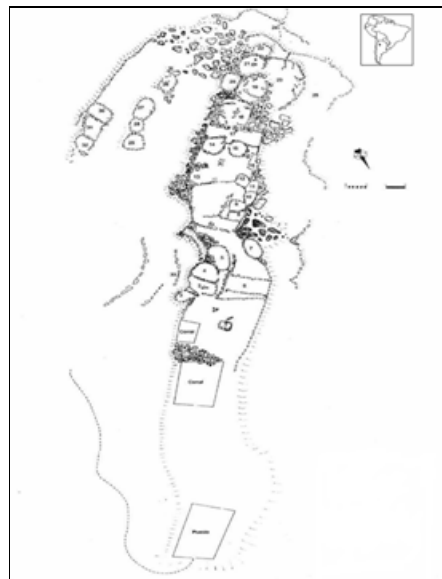


Figure 3: Plan view of El Pucará de las Lomas Verdes site, after Patané Aráoz [25]

The percentage of Inca and contemporary pottery pieces in the site reaches approximately 10% [24, 28]. However, classical Inca forms [29] present a variable representation of 6%. Within this group, the amount of fragments identified as “duck plates” is notable, with considerable variety in the types of zoomorphic appendixes represented [30] (Figure 4). The morphology and iconography of these objects present notable differences in comparison with specimens from Cusco and, conversely, they are relatively similar to those from Argentina’s northwest, while there are interesting variations throughout this macroregion.

Within the pottery-work findings, an engraved black *Famabalasto* with polished edges stands out, which apparently is a pendant ornament. It was also possible to recover lithic materials from the site—with and without format, made of different raw materials, some of which were allochthonous—, along with bone remains. A particularly relevant finding was a piece identified as a “*tumi*”, or ceremonial knife—used by the Inca elites or authorities—, which further contributes to separate this site from the rest of the localities [25].



Figure 4: Zoomorphic appendix of shadow plates found at Pucara de las Lomas Verdes archaeological site (photo by the author and C. J. Patané Aráoz).

Beyond this site, there are other places in the Valley with Inca pottery-work or with contemporary pottery styles, which, in these cases, are associated with a less complex architecture. Most of the pottery pieces recovered in excavations or surface collections do not reproduce the Cusco patterns beyond the overall shape of the piece. Most typically, though, their ornamentation combines Inca iconographic elements with local ornamentation, thus being truly syncretic objects. The aryballos displayed in local museums are an example of them. The local *raigambre* (roots) designs correspond to one of the classical Inca forms. Therefore, in some cases, only the State morphology prevails, while in some others, iconographic elements such as inverted triangles are present. This way, iconographic elements with pre-Inca style infiltrate into Inca forms, resulting in objects with much deeper meaning as regards social space than that which would emerge from mere poorly-achieved Cusco imitation pieces. It would seem as there is a manifest intention to incorporate local elements into a higher structure responding to a State order [24, 31, 32].

Additionally, a technological analysis on Tafi's pottery work evidences some differences between Inca and local styles. The bases present in Inca pottery work have a pyroclastic composition [23, 24, 28, 30, 33, 34, 35]. This feature is interpreted as an intentional addition of low-compaction-degree fallout deposits requiring little or none manipulation in order to achieve the disaggregation of their components [36]. It was possible to distinguish this type of manufacture because the pieces affected by it were lighter than those lacking further incorporations or those containing sand additions. The incorporation of pyroclastic deposits enables the production of lighter—and possibly more resistant—pieces, which could facilitate their transportability and use in spaces where the circulation of goods is important [24, 37, 38].

This was possibly a standardized manufacturing technique which began with Inca presence in these territories, although it does not entail the cancellation of other technological manifestations—everything indicates that pieces without pyroclastic components were still being developed. A regional analysis of this type of composition yields its presence in a great number of sites in Argentina's NW, reaching Mendoza province, one of the most southern slopes of the Tawantinsuyu territory [39].

In light of these facts, pyroclastic components do not represent a new technological identity developed with Inca presence but rather an intention to favor certain—physical and social—spaces where the pieces circulated. Other forms of pottery production, however, are still used even after Inca presence. The use of grinded pieces of pottery in late moments of pre-Hispanic development seems to have been an extensive practice in Argentina's NW, and it was continued even through post-conquest moments [24, 28, 40].

The higher percentages of pottery pieces with pyroclastic components in Tafi were reached in the Pucará de las Lomas Verdes site, with a group of artefactual, architectural and geographical elements distinguishing this site from the rest of the Valle's placements. Everything indicates that this placement was inhabited and managed by local groups, which maintained tight bonds with the State interests. Some of the previously mentioned architectonic elements, such as the presence of an incipient wall, do not allow us to discard the possibility that the site may have had a defense-oriented intention. However, the characteristics of the pottery record and the presence of prestigious elements lead us to interpret it as one destined to the settlement of local hierarchical groups, representing a key space for decision-making situations in the final moments of the pre-Hispanic occupation.

4. Tafi in the Context of Regional Politics

Most of the chronicles on the central Andean area make reference to the existence of local authorities in the Inca world, who are described being in charge of not only managing government, but also mediating in conflicts, organizing calendarial festivities and activities, managing the most immediate resources for the sustainability and development of the group, and keeping diplomatic relations [41, 42]. It seems that these authorities were key pieces for the political, economic and social organization of the territories incorporated to the State, being responsible not only for the local group or community, but also for other strata in the hierarchical Inca organization.

In this respect, Sternfeld's thorough [43] analysis of the chronicles yields, among other notions, the marked consensus characterizing the decisions made by these minority groups from local societies. In this respect, the author points out that “*the decisions made by the government, be them of an Imperial nature or deriving from an ethnic or small community group, were publicly discussed and agreed on in assemblies [...]. The consensus for these government decisions was achieved only after a*

process of negotiations among the different intervening authorities. These included ceremonial invitations, ritual offerings, discussion, conversations, advice by some experienced members, and exchange of gifts and plenty of "chicha" ([43]: 279-280). It is apparent that the local hierarchies were in charge of managing the government, which was established through the incorporation of the various sectors involved (Figure 5).

The lack of chronicles illustrating the situation of Argentina's NW in these moments somewhat hinders our possibility to assert this point, specially against the ethnohistorical information available for the Central Andean situation, even though Garcilazo [41] mentions eight examples of assemblies presided over by local authorities for the Collasuyu. In this context, some questions arise which need to be addressed in order to assess our particular studied situation. Firstly, we ought to address the question of the social organization in late moments, the existence or lack of hierarchical sectors playing a central part in decision-making processes and what their situation was during the Inca moment.

Additionally, it is also necessary to look into the role played by these hierarchical sectors as mediating institutions, in the sense of their participation in two clearly contrasting spaces which, in many cases, were intersected by clashing interests. In a previous work, we posed that these actors could be said to have functioned as gears, which articulated rather dissociated these two universes of meaning [31].

When Rostworowski [44] posited the continuity of the inner organizational systems of the local societies during the expansion phase, she alluded to the modulating role played by the ethnic chiefs in the articulation of local and State levels. In this sense, she determined that "...the local organization of lordships ("señorios") continued to work according to their ancestral habits. We thus find macro-ethnic chiefs acting in two levels: in the first, they acted as "curacas" of their lordships, governing their subjects and subalterns, managing local questions; and in the second, they maintained relations with the State, providing services as ordered by Cusco authorities" Rostworowski ([44]:220). In this context, a third issue arises, which is whether it is pertinent to keep considering the State and the local spheres as two dissociated worlds, related only at the level of Inca society as a whole, but which could be clearly distinguishable on the basis of their structural and functional logics.

With this discussion on the table, we shall focus on the Tafi situation based on the previously presented information. The existence of sectors distinguished by their status, political or religious position, that is, sectors which could be considered authorities in moments prior to the Inca presence in the Valley, is a matter which has not been defined yet as far as Tafi's archaeology is concerned. For nearer spaces, such as the Santa María Valley, to which Tafi was apparently socio-culturally integrated, an increasing level of inequality among the social strata is inferred, both in the societies structured around production as in those defined on the basis of the distribution and consumption of resources [45]. Production was allegedly controlled and, in some cases, standardized [46]. This is inferred not merely on the basis of analysis carried out on pottery work, but also by examining the metallurgy and the architectonic patterns, among other aspects.

In the context of the present work, one of the most perplexing phenomena is the absence of conglomerate architecture from the local Late Period, with the exception of El Pucará de las Lomas Verdes. Evidence from tombs fails to provide significant data as well. However, before discarding the existence of differences in the organization of the late society, it may be convenient to reformulate the indicators being used to arrive at such conclusions, instead of discarding *a priori* the existence of sectors exerting greater influence on the decisions of the community as has been suggested in recent discussions, e.g Acuto work [47]. A look at the situation of today's indigenous communities is enough to illustrate this point, where the hierarchy of the chiefs is not reflected by their material condition of existence, and yet they play a fundamental role in decision-making processes, highlighting a hierarchical and organic structure without fragmentation or segregation.

Western criteria for hierarchies can prove incompatible when applied to Andean logic, be it to confirm the presence of hierarchies or to discard their existence. Thus, the compulsive and uncritical use of western ontological categories to describe the local realities is, to say the least, but a further example of academic colonialism.

The situation in Tafi for the Inca Period is reflected in the abundance of pottery pieces and objects of status. The pottery pieces recovered in Inca contexts can be identified as belonging to the elites, to whom they were exclusive [48, 49, 50]. The administrative structure of the State highlighted certain spaces as key to the strengthening of social and political bonds. The food and the consumption of *chicha* were basic ingredients in these congregative activities, leaving plates and aryballos as visible records. The abundance of plates in El Pucará de Las Lomas Verdes points to the apparent relevance that this space had in practices entailing some type of social gathering, probably presided over by local chiefs. In addition, there is a profuse presence of other objects seen as representatives of hierarchies, such as metals or the previously mentioned ceremonial piece: *tumi*. We could further incorporate distinct pottery pieces, such as the black engraved *Famabalasto* fragment, with polished edges, interpreted as a pendant ornament. The presence of black-on-red *Famabalasto* and Yocavil materials, along with their disparate frequency in comparison to their numbers in lower areas of the Valley, adds to the idea of a State figure.



Figure 5. Picture recreating a scene of political commensalism in the Andes, after Páez [24]

Now, ¿what role did this social sector play in the articulation of these two spaces of meaning? Some years ago, excavations carried out in a depression from a sector of the Valley with circular and quadrangular structures raised questions on the finding of a pottery assembly comprised by five Santa María burial-jars forming a circle, surrounded by an black-on-red arybaloid with a bird representation, where a considerable number of dental pieces were identified. The characteristics of the burial emphasized the strong relation between the local and the State components [51, 52], with death symbolically reflecting the identitarian relation held in life. This example is added to the abundant material record from local museums, where the combination of local and Inca elements is present in the pottery pieces more closely related to the State, on the basis of the most visible aspects of pottery production, shape and ornamentation.

The characteristics of these objects, along with the previously mentioned burial, seem to indicate that they belonged to and were used by hierarchical sectors from Tafi society during those moments. We decided to label the situation of these hierarchical sectors as a “hinge” between two spaces of interests, a notion already posited by Murra [53] and clearly defined by Sternfeld ([43]: 19) when she states that “with their incorporation to Inca ruling (“*incanato*”), these local leaders were presented with new and diverse obligations: on the one hand, they had to meet the work-related demands of the Empire (being in charge of the number of work unities required), and, on the other hand, they had to look after the delicate social tissue of reciprocities and kinship bonds with their own people”. This could be boldly defined as a dual sense of belonging, a social condition lodged between an origin-related identity, funded in the values and shared relations with the local population as a whole, and the interests of sectors which could be considered foreign, whose shared interests could have led the local hierarchical sectors to become the representatives more strongly related to the State in the new territories.

5. Conclusion

The archaeological record recovered in Tafi indicates that the Inca presence did not apparently respond to a centralized type of politics, with direct control and strong impact on the local processes. We do not intend to label the Valley situation within a border model —military or cultural— but we believe it is compelling to discard coercion as an action policy, assigning a predominant role to the negotiation of interests, not without conflict or crisis. In this context, the local elites probably played a central role in the incorporation of the existing institutions to a new political order whose composition was apparently defined by the combination of interests from various social sectors, and with conflict and consensus as catalysts for action and response. This idea is backed by the uninterrupted use of many local technological and ornamental patterns in pottery work. Analysis carried out on the bases of the pottery pieces yields specific changes, not radical ones, which suggest the presence of a society that preserves manufacturing traditions —social memory is present and they allow its development— while introducing new practices oriented to concrete ends.

The situation in Tafi in its final stages before the conquest reflects a social and political space which appears not to have lost the social identity of late moments. Quite on the contrary, it is from this place that positions are negotiated in relation to imperial interests, having local hierarchical groups as main protagonists. The complex socio-political reality of these moments transcends the simplified dichotomy governed-governing.

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