

Tiahuanaco

Important Pottery Production





In comparison to the famous Tiahuanaco ruins of which unfortunately very little structures are left, many extraordinary pottery pieces were excavated. Most of the astonishing undamaged pottery vessels were found in graves, where they were deposited as funeral gifts. Some of these are up to 2,500 years old and most originate from the period of Tiahuanaco's cultural heydays. These are relatively old for the ancient history of the Andes region. Please consider, that the Inca culture only began to flourish about 800 years ago and lasted for about 300 years until the Spanish conquistadores arrived and destroyed it.

Enormous Destruction and Exploration

Unfortunately, the conquistadores did a perfect job to demolish all pagan cultures driven by greed, religious zeal and a strong will to Christianize and erect churches. So, these churches were built from the readily available stones of deserted Tiahuanaco ritual buildings. Just for your understanding how immense the Spaniards plundered this continent think about this. These facts were taken from the precise book-keeping of conquistadores. With the robbed precious metal, a street twelve feet wide could be plastered with gold right across the Atlantic to Spain. The great Spanish power in Europe in the middle age was fully financed by the robbed gold and silver from South America.

Historic Overview

The American continent was first populated about 45,000 years ago from Siberia to Alaska via an ice-free land bridge called Beringia. In Colombia and Brazil paleolithic rock paintings were discovered and dated to be 30,000 years

old. The oldest mummy bundles in the Chilean Atacama desert have an age of 28,000 years. One can assume that the ancient settlers were roaming hunters and gatherers like our ancestors in Europe and Asia at the same time. And we also know, that the first advanced cultures like Tiahuanaco were well versed in astronomy and used this knowledge to direct their ritual buildings along the equinox dates. Also, their decorations are very much focused on the importance of sun and moon.

First Written Script?

Only a script did not exist in the advanced cultures of the Andes compared to the hieroglyphs of the Maya in Central America at the same time. Astonishingly also the Incas did not use any script about a mere 800 years ago. Just remember that the first script was invented 7,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. But the Incas used a clever system of communication the so-called quipu. At first experts believed this string of many cords with numerous different knots and colors were only used for counting purposes. But recent research suggests, that quipus also contain certain basic information with short terms and messages.

Ceramic Wealth in Bolivia

Two third of Bolivia consist of the eastern lowlands and the rest are the highlands called altiplano. This is lying in between two mountain chains the cordilleras with over 20,000 feet high permanently snow-covered peaks. But here different to Europe the snow line is much higher and the altiplano at 13,000 feet seldomly receives snow fall, because it is protected by the eastern cordillera. Not only on

the altiplano ancient cultures existed, which produced beautiful ceramic ware. Bolivia is possibly the country on this continent, which is home to the most different ceramic producing cultures. We came to know various, which started already 15,000 years ago to manufacture silicon arrow heads and other stone tools like the Viscacha and Ayampiti cultures.

Certainly, there are more and older traces of human settlement and existence, as the continent has been populated much earlier. But the first ceramic producing cultures on this continent started 2,000 years later than in other parts of the world. Here pottery manufacture began about 3,000 years ago by the Huancarini and others in the Oruro, Cochabamba, Tarija and Lipez region all situated in Bolivia. The latter made pottery from white clay, which were decorated for the first time with black colored stripe motives. Chiripa was the first pre-Tiahuanaco culture, which started to use the stepped and wave motives about 2,600 years ago. This became typical for the Tiahuanaco cultural design. We will mention the many other interesting Bolivian pottery cultures later on.

Pottery as Cult Form

There are more important cultures, which created next to their buildings and statues a further significant cult form to show divine symbols and express messages. Tiahuanaco used expressive forms and multi-chrome painted motives, which were so varied and impressive like in this culture. Tiahuanaco belongs to the most important and influencing cultures of the Andes.

One of the first advanced cultures of the continent is Chavin in Peru, which began about 3,000 years ago together with Paracas. They developed parallel and lasted for 700 years. The Nasca culture became famous, because of its super large animal motives laid out on the coastal slopes each covering various miles in size. These can be best seen from aboard small aircraft using the offered tourist flights. Its pottery design is strongly influenced by Paracas motives and forms. On the altiplano Tia-





huanaco developed at the same time as important religious center. The famous Moche culture followed with its expressive and explicit ceramic vessel forms including sexual scenes and depictions of illnesses. Thereafter came Chimú and finally the great Inca culture until the arrival of Spanish conquistadores 500 years ago.

Tiahuanaco Ceramic Periods

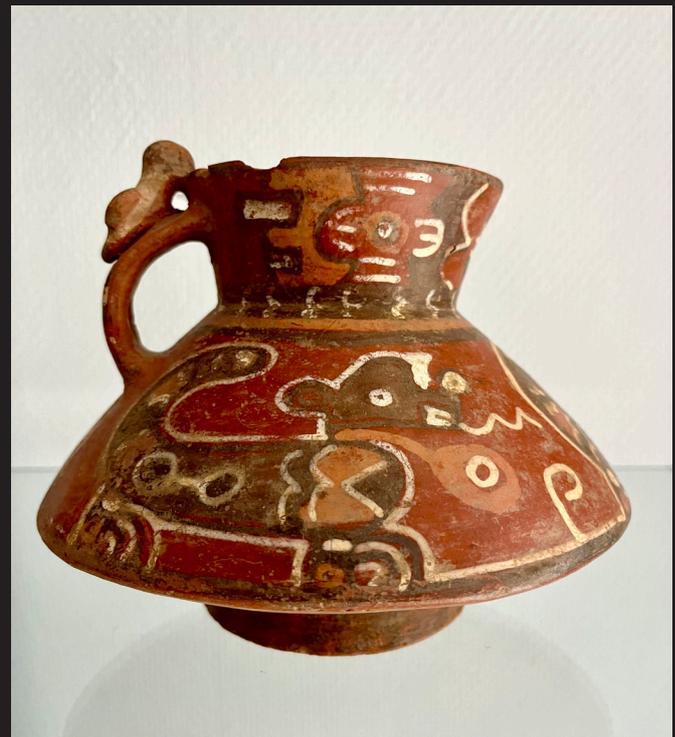
The pottery production can be classified via form and painted decorations like the ritual buildings into various periods. Experts decided the extraordinary intensive pottery production lasting 1,700 years into five phases. About 2,500 years ago it began with simple thick walled pottery vessels, which were already polychrome painted with animal motives. Some pots were also adorned with simple faces. One can notice

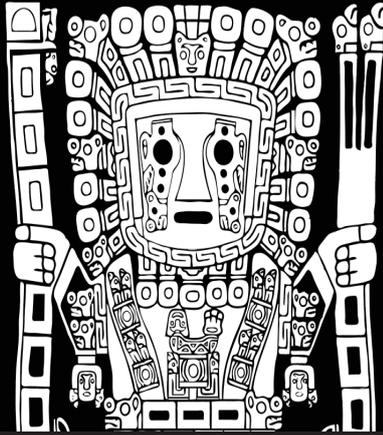
some Pukara influences, as well as certain Paracas design features. Both cultures were situated in modern-day Peru. Some experts even believe to have noticed few Condorhuasi motives from northern Argentina in Tiahuanaco pottery pieces from the early phase.

The second period was shorter and lasted until 2,000. Still simple painted vessels were manufactured, but recognizable as Tiahuanaco style. New are the snake motives and single or double handles on certain drinking vessels.

Antique Period

Only during the third phase also called Antique Tiahuanaco, which began 2,000 years ago and lasted for 300 years, the typical traditional Tiahuanaco style was fully developed. Now the





reddish shiny grounding was common and all pottery vessels painted in multi-chrome colors. Ceramic ware became finer with thinner walls and new forms were produced. The pottery manufacturing is not any longer concentrated at the ritual center and produced also at other sites in the Tiahuanaco cultural area. But this ware is thicker and simpler painted, because the highly skilled artisans were working at the religious center.

Classic Period

The fourth phase was also Tiahuanaco's heydays and lasted 400 years until 700 after Christ. During this time beautiful ceramic pieces with further new forms being wonderfully painted were manufactured. The forms were still traditional without depicting scenes of daily life compared with other cultures such as Moche. Looking at the huge number of Moche pottery in museums worldwide, we are surprised about this vast quantity. We assume, that Tiahuanaco produced as much pottery pieces as other major cultures. But why are there so little Tiahuanaco ceramic artefacts to be seen in museums? Is the interest for their cultural past in Bolivia not so huge and therefore not worth to

invest in an important state collection? Why was a sizable museum along international standards not build yet? Why does Bolivia not to draw significant tourist income like Peru very successfully does? We assume, that due to missing state interest to protect their important cultural past, many artefacts began already hundred years to end up in numerous local and international private collections.

Expansive Period

During the fifth and last phase pottery production took place in the entire Tiahuanaco cultural area on the altiplano from the eastern borders of lake Titicaca further south to lake Poopo near Oruro. Preferred are now the keru drinking cup with condor or puma heads, as well as a new funnel form with a hole in the bottom. The iconography has not really changed and stays very much traditional with the same ritual motives of puma, condor, sun, stars and step-wave motives. The latter always representing the mother earth goddess and the water god.

Typical Pottery Forms

The Tiahuanaco ceramics surprise by the manifold forms and variances, as well as bril-



liant colors. The amount of found pottery sherds is enormous. Most of the undamaged pieces of various sizes like drinking cups, bowls, bulbous vessels with or without handles, funnels and figurines were excavated. Typical for Tiahuanaco are the keru drinking cups. They were manufactured in more than forty varied forms. Often, they had one or up to three bulgy rings in the middle for better grip. Others were decorated with condor or puma heads sticking out on the upper half. Some keru were even adorned with human faces. These were either simple and flat or very realistically modulated to give the impression to represent a specific person possibly a high priest. Faces are an important feature in Tiahuanaco pottery design.

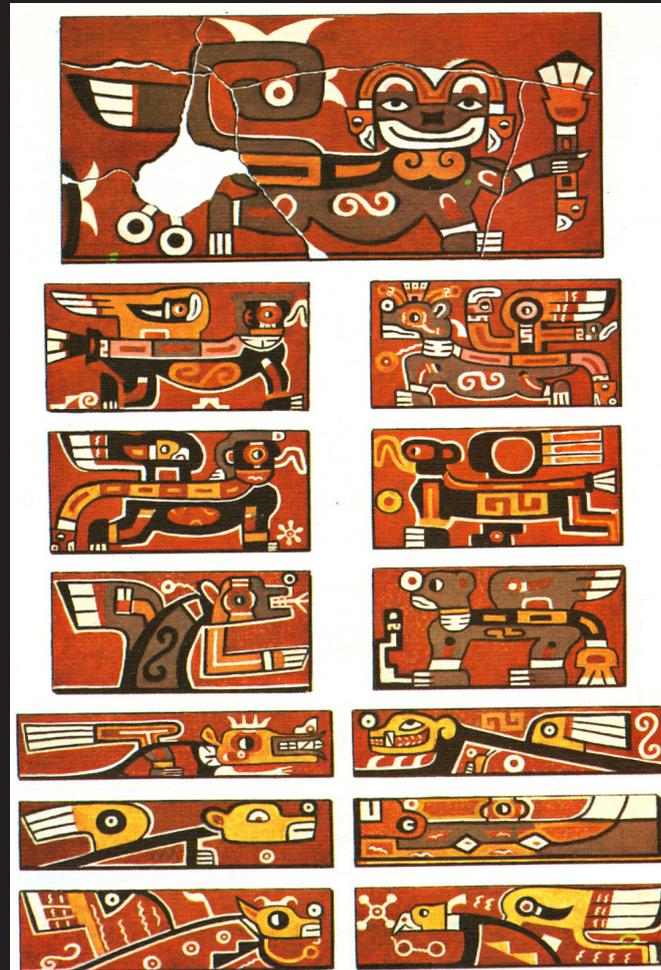
The Tiahuanaco potters were certainly guided by the priesthood to use over more than 1,000 years nearly the same traditional motives with little variances. Only the form of vessels changed with quite a few new forms being developed. But still no scenes of daily life so typical for other cultures were taken up into the Tiahuanaco repertoire. Also modulated drinking pipes used by near all other cultures on the continent are absent in Tiahuanaco pottery art. This is also true for pottery ware with bridging holder joining two connecting vessels.

Important Keru Form

One can really say, that the keru was the most important pottery form in the Tiahuanaco culture. This might result from the drink sacrifice rituals being regularly practiced, as well as from consuming intoxicating liquids like chicha and others during ceremonies. Keru cups were produced in roughly three sizes of five, eight and more than twelve inches high. Rather impressive are those modulated with a very realistic face. They look like a small mold of some once face. One could assume, these were representing a specific person. The faces were either modulated at the lower half of the vessel or the keru was formed as an upper half of a body with a head on top. Few of these keru were even unpainted, but these were always produced in black clay.

Poly- and Multi-chrome Painting

Typical for Tiahuanaco ceramics is the red-dish shiny grounding, which has been painted with various colors. This can be seen at



some keru, where the inside is grounded only partly. Was this a sign for ritual use? Or were these pieces for daily use at home? The used colors were black, white, various red tone, as well as brown yellowish and even greyish. The colors were produced from locally available minerals. Surprisingly these colors were used by all ancient cultures in South America.

Important Motives

The puma and condor depictions were the most important ritual motives and represented certainly gods. Both animals were wearing always a sun symbol dangling from a neck collar. Sometimes they were also painted with a crown on their heads. You can also see pumas with a condor on their back or simply with wings.

In another common motive we see condors holding a band in their peak with three small balls in a row. The meaning of this has received various interpretations from divine trinity to snake and others. A very special depiction is a standing puma on his hind legs holding a scepter in S form. This certainly indicates a divine status. You can see this rare depiction in one of the pictures.

Common Motives

Many pottery vessels have not been painted with animals or faces, but only with simple motives. These include the typical stepped and wavy lines, empty rectangles, dots or circles in various colors, wide crosses with dots, stars and various motives looking like an eye. All certainly have a particular religious meaning still unknown to us.





Special Pottery Forms

Unique in Tiahuanaco ceramic art are the incense burning vessels. They exist in two forms as smaller keru with border with overlapping waves, or in form of a puma figure with open back. These are recognized by the two holes on the side and can therefore not be used as drinking cup. Were these incense burners possibly carried around during rituals with strings attached through the holes? Without any written script or paintings thereof, this is difficult to establish with certainty. Another unique form are the funnels, which have a hole at their bottom. Were they used



during fertility rituals? One theory indicates, that they were filled with chicha and priests consecrated fields with a few drops of chicha by lifting their finger from the hole. We are not convinced of this interpretation. We believe, that they were just used as a funnel or dosing mechanism for distillation of liquids. Possibly they were used for chicha production, which was manufactured in great volumes. Two other ceramic pieces we came across made us think again. They were rather small bulbous vessels with a hole at the rounded bottom. One was decorated with a slightly modulated face on the vessel and the other had a small open head. Both vessels could not stand alone. This supports the idea of being held during use only for a short time and when emptied simply put down. But these two pieces do not belong to the Tiahuanaco culture.

Black Pottery

In Bolivia we have seen some cultures producing mainly pottery made from white clay, but still being painted or incised. Tiahuanaco is also famous for the rare wonderful looking but unpainted black pottery pieces in keru form and as puma figures. Some were decorated with simple line incisions. It seems that the black ceramic vessels were reserved for the elite or priests. The three pieces we were able to study included a medium simple keru with slightly larger than normal base, as well as a large face keru and an incense burner puma figure. Some of which you can see in the pictures.

Animal Motives

The animal motives are manifold like any others and are certainly of a religious character. The ritual world of Tiahuanaco was based on divinities, which had their animal representatives on earth. Therefore, Tiahuanaco typical motives are often animals such as puma, condor, snake, fish or anthropomorph figures partly in abstract or natural form. Always recurring symbols are stepped and wavy motives, representing two of the trinity goddesses like mother earth and water.

Andes Divine Universe

After so much research this is difficult to imagine, but only a few years ago after comparing studies experts found out there exists a divine trinity. The divine universe in all an-



cient Andes cultures did not change for over 2,500 years. Only the depictions changed over time. It started with Chavin and passed on in chronological order of the cultures of Paracas, Nasca, Tiahuanaco, Huari, Recuay, Moche, Chimu, Lambayeque and ending with the Incas.

Chavin were the first to establish a divine trinity with a main sun god and two mother goddesses of earth and water. This selection should not surprise us. Let's remember these cultures were agriculturally based communities and very fertility focused to survive in harsh mountain climatic conditions. This explains the important stepped and wave motives derived from the cultivation terraces with clever irrigation systems. These were still used and perfected by the Incas. On the altiplano plains Tiahuanaco used irrigated raised cultivation beds, but in hilly terrain as well stepped terraces.



Divine Depictions

The variety of depictions surprises. Pumas played a particular important role and therefore dominated the amount of all images. The depictions include feline, zoomorph, anthropomorph, ornithomorph, hybrid motives and symbols. The painted images were created in various way like realistic, stylistic, geometric, abstract and emblematic.

Tiahuanaco Pantheon

Looking at the ritual buildings experts discovered on the left over friezes proof of various divinities, which are also part of the painted decorations on the ceramic ware. With certainty the sun god was the most important idol. But was this really the case? And was the famous so-called sun gate really the main entrance to the important sun temple? That is not clear as the sun gate was found outside its original context. Let's consider this. During a sun eclipse the moon moves in front of the sun. In the Chimu culture therefore the moon was equally important as the main sun god. Did the earlier Tiahuanaco culture consider this thinking in their beliefs as well? For the Incas as well both gods played a major role. Gold artefacts were dedicated to the sun and silver to the moon god. In Cusco the Incas equipped two temple court yards with entire landscapes including trees, birds, puma and

llama figures. One was entirely made from gold the other from silver including gold and silver plated floors and walls. A myth even suggests, that the moon landscape featured a river with running mercury. Archeologists also established, that most divinities in the Tiahuanaco culture were goddesses. They further assume, that the Aymara indios took over the Tiahuanaco pantheon including pachamama the goddess of earth, paximama the moon goddess, kochomama the water goddess and still pray to these today. Not to forget huaya huirakjocha and achachilas which are the gods of wind and mountains. Some experts also believe, that the Tiahuanaco elite was a theocratic class of high priests and had a divine status.

Human Motives

Most interestingly are the ceramic vessels adorned with faces. There are two kinds of faces. Abstract flat faces with slightly raised formed nose, mouth, eyes and ears. But impressive are the very naturalistic modulated faces, which seem to resemble or represent a specific person. Of further interest are the half body vessel with heads. But arms are totally missing or only indicated as small stumps. But do these human faces and vessels really represent a specific person such as high priests? Or did they just indicate to be used for a specific ritual purpose like funeral gifts never used and



only produced for this purpose? The latter seems to be very probable, because Tiahuanaco pottery was a form of cultural expression and message. We should also consider, that most vessels had a ritual character and were only used for such purpose. If we look closer at the human body formed vessels, it is clear that it is difficult to drink from the small openings at the top. Again, we are missing unfortunately any written sources and depictions of their usage.

Cultural Influence

The iconography of Tiahuanaco pottery has influenced the entire Andes region right down to the important cultures on the pacific coast. Why was that the case? Possibly because Tiahuanaco was an important regional pilgrimage site for other cultures and people. Further one must consider, that Tiahuanaco was not a military power to subdue other cultures like later the Incas were experts at. Tiahuanaco was an economic driven force with flourishing long distance trade and preferred to forge political alliances. This resulted in copying the typical Tiahuanaco iconography, develop it further and add own motives. So, Tiahuanaco similar depictions, motives and symbolism can be seen in many other cultures which followed like Huari, Wari and Nasca.

Following Cultures

Alone in the Andes region of modern-day Bolivia there are over a dozen cultures which followed. They all had an active pottery production with own forms and motives. Unfortunately, most of them did not reach any more the high quality of Tiahuanaco pottery production. The vessels were thicker and simpler painted or only incised. They were possibly more in daily use than made for ritual purposes. We list here only the names of the most important Bolivian cultures in the time line from Tiahuanaco to the Incas: Saucses, Tupuraya, Mojocoya, Nazcoide, Yampara, Presto-Puno, Humahuaca, Huruquilla, Yura, Chaqui, Lipez, Mollo and finally Collo. Some only produced pottery from white or greyish clay.

Picture Credits

We thank all institutes, museums and photographers for making available some of their pictures. A special mention goes to Prof. Posnansky and Col. Diez de Medina archives.

