

THE POSSIBLE INITIAL PERIOD ORIGINS OF THE CHAVIN JAGUAR MOTIF

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For years, the focus of study in the Chavin culture has been on their influence on later cultures. This study is meant to look into the influences that cultures in the Initial Period may have had on the Chavin, in particular, to their famous jaguar motif. To do this, radiocarbon dates are taken into account as well as use of a seriation of Chavin art styles and unique features of the Chavin motif. After researching seven sites but only being able to use three due to various reasons, it appears that the Chavin jaguar motif was truly a unique, stylistic invention of the Chavin culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Chavin culture of Peru has been the focus of much debate among South American archaeologists. From the spread of their culture to their origins, multiple theories have been presented. Much of this debate was spurred on by early research that, without the help of modern dating techniques, confused the sequence of sites and styles. Julio Tello, the discoverer of Initial Period (1800-900B.C.) sites like Cerro Blanco and Punkuri, concluded that they must have been offshoots of the Chavin culture due to similarities in art styles (Tello 1943). He accounted for any small stylistic differences by claiming they were the result of local influences. This line of thought is what lead many to think of Chavin as a sort of mother culture in Peru. Later radiocarbon dates confirmed that many of the sites Tello thought to be coastal variations of Chavin in fact predated the Chavin culture (Burger 1992). Since radiocarbon dating revealed the actual time frame of Initial Period and Early Horizon sites, archaeologists such as Rafael Larco Hoyle, Wendell Bennett and Gordon Willey began looking into where and how the Chavin actually influenced later cultures. However, very few looked in the opposite direction. Specifically, where did the Chavin come from? What are their origins? These are questions that have not been thoroughly investigated. Thomas and Shelia Pozorski have worked at documenting Initial Period sites such as Cerro Sechin and Moxeke and their research will prove valuable when looking into the possible origins of the Chavin.

The Pozorskis and others such as Richard Burger, Chiaki Kano, and John Rowe have discovered works of art from Initial Period sites and have noted some tenuous connections

between those art styles and those of Chavin de Huantar (Pozorski 1986; Burger 1992; Kano 1979; Rowe 1962). However, many of these connections have not been extensively studied, leaving us wondering about any relationships that may exist.

There are many ways of determining origins of a culture but one very intriguing way of tracing Chavin origins is through their art styles; in particular, their famous jaguar. The Chavin jaguar has a very distinct style. If the beginnings of this style can be found in earlier sites, there may be a connection between the two. The Chavin have long been thought to be the pioneers of the jaguar icon and have thus been dubbed by some as the jaguar cult. Perhaps it is because this idea has been largely accepted that we do not have a good picture of Chavin development. In critically analyzing and comparing Chavin jaguar motifs to earlier Initial Period jaguar motifs, perhaps a connection can be made. By doing this, we can better understand the sequence of cultural development in ancient Peru and we can understand in what way, if any, the Chavin were influenced by the iconography of earlier cultures.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Chavin**

Before continuing with the search for the origin of the Chavin jaguar motif, we must first know who the Chavin were and who their predecessors in the Initial Period were.

The Chavin were a cultural group living in the north central highlands of the Andean Mountains in Peru (Figure 1). It seems their culture appeared around 900 BC and lasted until about 200 BC. This time frame is known as the Early Horizon. The main site of Chavin de Huantar is located between the Mosna and Huachecsa Rivers and lies at an elevation of about 3150 meters above sea level (CyArk 2009). The fact that the site was in a prime trade location

may have been a factor in the apparent mass spread of their religious ideas, specifically the jaguar motif. The Chavin are so well known for their jaguar motif that John Roe and Peter Rowe developed a seriation of jaguar motifs throughout the period of Chavin occupation (Roe 1974; Rowe 1962). They established four phases in which the traits of the jaguar change enough to be distinct but remain similar enough so as to be able to identify them as Chavin. The earliest phase is AB and it is exemplified by the Lanzon and numerous cornice blocks of the New Temple (Figure A1). Phase C is typified in the Tello Obelisk (Figure A2). The best example of the Phase D style is seen on the Black and White Portal (Figure A3). Finally, the latest phase, EF, is seen on the Raimondi Stone (Figure A4), (Rowe 2007). These are the phases and examples of styles that will be used to determine whether or not jaguar motifs from the Initial Period could be seen as direct influence for the Chavin jaguar.

### **Previous Work in the Area**

Julio Tello, discoverer of such Initial Period sites as Cerro Blanco and Punkuri also studied the Chavin in the 1940's. He came to the conclusion, based on art styles, that Cerro Blanco and Punkuri must have been Chavin influenced sites (Tello 1943:137). This was before radiocarbon dating when it was still thought that the Chavin were a mother culture and anything similar to their art styles must have been influenced by them, not vice versa. But it is now clear, thanks to radiocarbon dating, that these sites belong in the Initial Period, thus predating the Chavin. These sites, however, did not yield any jaguar motifs and will not be included in this study. Other Initial Period sites that have shown evidence for jaguar motifs will be included, as they may have previously been thought have taken influence from the Chavin.



Figure 1. Chavin de Huantar and surrounding Initial Period sites. Adapted from Google Maps.

It was a generally accepted thought that the Chavin were pioneers in all aspects of their culture after Tello did his study. It seemed to be accepted that they were the horizon culture of the Early Horizon and that no similar or possibly influential cultures preceded them. This idea seemed to be so well accepted in fact, that very few people tried to discover the origins of the Chavin. Instead, focus turned to how the Chavin influenced other cultures for generations to come. Theories cropped up that explained how the Chavin jaguar motif was spread. Since there was no evidence for violent conflict, the leading theory was a peaceful spread through trade (Burger 1992:191). John Roe and Peter Rowe also developed a chronological system for organizing jaguar motifs within the Chavin time period (Roe 1974; Rowe 1962). It seemed every aspect of the Chavin was getting attention except the one aspect that everyone already accepted

as true; the origins of the jaguar motif.

The idea that perhaps the Chavin weren't the ones to pioneer the famous jaguar motif is slowly gaining momentum with research done in Initial Period sites by Thomas and Shelia Pozorski. Their excavations and research have uncovered large jaguar head motifs in Caballo Muerto as well as numerous other contributions to our understanding of the Initial Period in general through work done in Moxeke and Cerro Sechin (Pozorski 1980;86;95). Also, work done by Richard Burger in carbon dating many sites such as Garagay and Caballo Muerto has advanced our understanding of the Initial Period and has opened many possibilities for study of pre-Chavin cultures (Burger 1981). The first study to be done which focused on the origins of Chavin culture was by Chiaki Kano in 1970 and later in 1979 (Kano 1970;79). He focused on the site of Shillacoto. He claims many of the ceramics from this site showcase the Chavin style. Also discovered at this site were two bones inscribed with jaguar motifs. These artifacts will be examined in this study and new conclusions may be reached. Besides Kano's study, the topic of the origin of the Chavin has largely been skimmed over in research. In John Rowe's book on the seriation of Chavin art styles, he simply states, “ The Chavin style presumably originated somewhere in the area of its distribution, but we do not yet know where.” (Rowe 1962:5) The purpose of his research was not to discover the origins of the Chavin but his statement puts our lack of knowledge into perspective.

### **The Initial Period**

The Initial Period in Peru lasted from 1800 – 900BC (Jacobs 2000). This is the time when societies were becoming more complex with the introduction of pottery and monumental architecture. This is also the time when jaguar motifs began appearing in Peru. Perhaps it is

through poor archaeological record or it may be that it just wasn't that common, but there are very few representations of jaguars known from the Initial Period when compared to the Early Horizon and later periods. However, this study will focus on seven Initial Period sites that were chosen specifically because previous studies mentioned that there was some form of a jaguar motif represented in their archaeological records. These sites include: Kotosh, Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke, Huaca de los Reyes-Caballo Muerto, Garagay, La Galgada, Shillacoto, Punkuri (Figure 1). The fact that some of these sites began in the Initial Period and continued for a time into the Early Horizon makes the seriation of Chavin styles done by Roe and Rowe even more valuable. This way, if an Initial Period site is overlapping in time with Chavin de Huantar, the seriation, along with radiocarbon dates can help determine direction of influence.

As previously stated, the record for the Initial Period is somewhat limited in terms of jaguar motif remains and even within the seven sites chosen for this study, evidence is limited. This is not to say comparisons can not be made, but we must be wary in drawing definitive conclusions from such limited data. However, if comparisons can be made, perhaps it will inspire us to dig deeper for possible answers that remain uncovered.

The site of Kotosh is located near Huanuco, Peru and dates from 2300 – 900 BC (Campbell 2010). Perhaps best known for the Temple of the Crossed Axes, the site also contains many Chavin artifacts as well. Moxeke, part of the site at Pampa de las Llamas is located in the Casma River valley near the coast of Peru. It dates to about 1880 – 1340 BC (Pozorski 2005:154). The site contains at least 2 large friezes depicting felines which were excavated by Thomas and Shelia Pozorski in the mid 1980s. These have been partially destroyed but they will still be examined in this study to determine if they are significant remains. Huaca de los Reyes at

the Caballo Muerto complex is located in the Moche river valley in Peru. It dates from 1730 – 850 BC (Burger 1992:92). This site was chosen for this study because of the numerous large clay heads that were uncovered by the Pozorskis in the early 1980s. These heads often showcase feline features and may have preceded the Chavin culture by 400 years. Thomas Pozorski believes that the entire site, along with the large clay heads, was built in a “...single, integrated construction phase...”(Pozorski 1995:338) Which means the site was built all at one time around 1300 BC. Garagay is located in the Rimac river valley in Peru. It dates from approximately 1640-897 BC (Burger 1992:63). La Galgada is located in the Tablachaca river valley in Peru and dates to around 2857 – 1947 BC (Burger 1992). A mosaic shell disc depicting a jaguar was found at this site. Shillacoto dates from around 2000-200 BC (Kubler 1962:509) and was excavated by Chiaki Kano in the 1970's. This site produced an example of a definite pre-Chavin jaguar that was so different from the Chavin jaguar style that it can not be considered a direct influence in style but possibly in theme. There were also 2 bone artifacts uncovered from a tomb that Kano believes may be precursors to the Chavin style. Punkuri is located in the Nepena river valley in Peru and has never been carbon dated (Burger 1992). This site contains a stone head carved in the middle of a staircase that could be a precursor to the Chavin however, it may be more related to Cerro Sechin than Chavin de Huanter.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to determine whether or not the Chavin jaguar was developed independently or was a continuation of earlier styles, many factors were considered. First, relative dates were looked at in order to determine, to the best of our present knowledge, exactly when the sites chosen for this study fit into the time line of ancient Peru. For this, Richard Burgers (Burger 1992) radiocarbon

dates were used as they are the most recent and the most complete to date. Once the relative dating sequence was established, more scrutiny could be put on the development of the jaguar iconography and motifs over long periods of time. To compare any jaguar motifs at the seven Initial Period sites to the motifs at Chavin de Huantar, first a seriation of the Chavin iconography is needed as well as a determination of certain features that make a jaguar uniquely Chavin. John Rowe's seriation (Rowe 1962) of Chavin styles as well as the expansion of his seriation done by Peter Roe (Roe 1974) will be employed here. Rowe developed four distinct phases based on stylistic differences and similarities which he designated AB, C, D and EF. These phases correspond roughly to the dates as following: AB – 1200 BC, C – 750 BC, D and EF – 390-200 BC. The sculpture of each phase is generally more complex than the preceding phase and represents a temporal evolution within the Chavin culture. In comparing the iconography, these phases will be taken into account as a way of determining whether a motif from an Initial Period site was influenced by the Chavin or vice-versa. For example, if an Initial Period jaguar icon resembles a Chavin jaguar from phase D, chances are the icon was brought to that site from Chavin. But if an Initial Period icon resembles a jaguar from phase AB, the Chavin may have taken influence from it. Influence can not, however, be determined by phase comparison alone. There must be a way of determining stylistic influence as well. Though the Chavin jaguar changed over time, it still maintained a few specific features that are present in all representations of jaguars. Those features are what make a jaguar specifically Chavin as they are quite unique. The following are features that Richard Burger believes to be fairly standard within Chavin culture (Burger 1992) and upon inspection, it can be agreed that they do seem to be standard features of the Chavin jaguar. Probably the most recognizable of all the features is the

snarling mouth with crossed fangs showing (Figure 2). There are a few variations of this motif, but for the most part, it stays intact throughout the Chavin time period. Most often, the fangs are overlapping the large pronounced lips of the jaguar. The eyes are also fairly recognizable as they are almost always looking upward (Figure 2). Only in a few cases are the eyes looking anywhere else. Most of these cases are not even jaguars being depicted but humans with some jaguar-like features. The large, often flared nose of the Chavin jaguar is also quite distinctive (Figure 2). These features will be compared to those of the Initial Period sites to determine whether or not there is any stylistic connection. One other factor that may come into play is the idea of a “kenning”, as defined by John Rowe (Rowe 1962:15). A kenning is a feature of the art that represents one thing but looks like another, a sort of visual metaphor. For example, in many Chavin jaguars, the eyebrows or whiskers are depicted as snakes. This seems to be a distinctly Chavin feature but if it does show up in initial period motifs, it may show a possible connection. However, if it does not show in earlier motifs, we can assume that it was a Chavin stylistic creation or addition.



Figure 2. Traits of a Chavin jaguar. Crossed fangs, *left*, upward looking eye, *middle*, flared nose, *right*. Figure by Peter Roe 1974.

It should also be pointed out that this study will focus on stylistic analysis only; thematic analysis is not appropriate in this case. Since only sites within Peru are being examined, the possibility of a jaguar motif is quite high since jaguars are common in this country. However, the idea, or theme, of a jaguar motif is not enough to make comparisons by in order to attempt to determine influential precursors to the Chavin. Only if there are similarities in style can we make

inferences as to whether or not these specific jaguar motifs could be considered true precursors to the Chavin motif.

## **DATA**

In the preliminary research done for this study, the list of Initial Period sites containing some form of jaguar motif was narrowed down to the seven previously mentioned. These sites were chosen specifically because they were the only ones in which previous researchers claimed there was a jaguar motif, in some cases, surely pre-Chavin. In developing the methodology for this study and looking more closely at the seven chosen sites, it became clear that some of them seem to have been misinterpreted or poorly documented. Such was the case for four of the seven sites, including Moxeke, La Galgada, Kotosh and Punkuri.

In the case of Moxeke, it seems there were a number of large clay heads present at the site, purportedly similar to those at Huaca de los Reyes (Moseley 1974). However, these heads were destroyed by natural disasters and as a result, no visual record was obtained. Thus, we cannot do a stylistic analysis for this site. The so called jaguar motif at La Galgada seems to be a misinterpretation from Michael Moseley. At the site is a shell, mosaic disk which Moseley describes as, "...depicting a feline in a manner similar to much later Chavin art." (Moseley 1992: 115) Upon inspection of the disk in question, it could not be clearly determined what animal, if any was being depicted (Figure A5). It is clear that the disk is meant to be a face, but the features are very vague and not indicative of a jaguar, certainly not in the Chavin style. The site of Kotosh has been divided into six periods, one of which is the Kotosh Chavin Period (Izumi 1972). This is when the Chavin actually came in and built their own structures at the site and it is also when any Chavin-like motifs occur within the site. The site of Punkuri, which contains the stone head

in the middle of a staircase, can not be used in this study simply because a radiocarbon date has not been established for the site (Figure A6). It has been placed in the Initial Period because of its similarity with Cerro Sechin and Moxeke (Burger 1992) but no solid date has been established. As a result of these misinterpretations, these sites will not be analyzed further in this study. However, the remaining three sites, Huaca de los Reyes, Shillacoto and Garagay all have recognizable jaguar motifs present and can therefore be analyzed.

### Comparisons and Results

The site of Garagay, dating to about 1200 BC, has a few clay friezes which Burger says represent spider motifs. While this may be true, some of them have feline attributes and look to be in a style similar to that of the Chavin jaguar (Figure 3). Although none of the features of these possible jaguars match directly with any phase of the Chavin, they do seem to have some Chavin like qualities. There is the large, flared nose and large pronounced lips, often seen in the Chavin motif as well as a set of fangs overlapping the lips. The overlapping fangs do not occur in a particularly Chavin style, but it is a trait of Chavin art. It may be that this is an example of a Chavin-like, yet pre-Chavin jaguar motif.

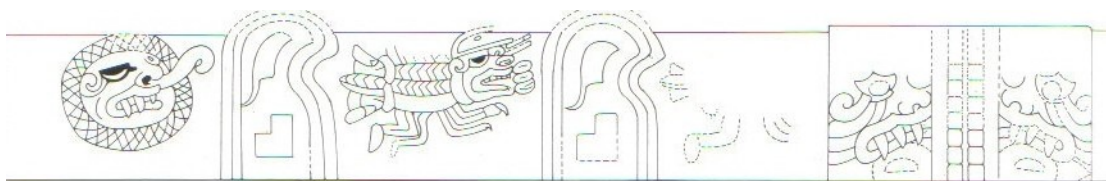


Figure 3. Garagay friezes. Spider motif, *left* and *center*. Possible jaguar motif, *right*. Figure by Richard Burger, 1992.

Shillacoto was occupied through the Initial Period and into the Early Horizon and dates from approximately 2000-200BC. Found at the site in a tomb are two carved bone artifacts with very obvious jaguar motifs carved into them (Figure 4). The first, and larger artifact displays a very Chavin like mouth with clenched teeth and crossed fangs. The fangs are also cut off at the edge of the lips and do not continue beyond. There is no real discernible nose on one side of the bone, however on the opposite side, there is a stylistic curve that could possibly be interpreted as a large nose. The eye is circular with the iris in the middle but with a line leading from the iris to the top edge of the eye. This line could be interpreted as a way in which to make it seem as though the figure is looking upward. There are also stylistic curves over the eyes that are similar to the Chavin practice of kenning the eyebrows of jaguars as snakes. The second, and smaller, bone artifact also displays the iris with the line but has no stylistic curves above the eye. The mouth on one side has been partially damaged but on the opposite side, the mouth has clenched teeth but only one fang which terminates at the edge of the bottom lip. The nose on this side depicts the flow of mucus, probably in response to the use of hallucinogenic drugs. On the opposite side, the nose is depicted in much the same way as the eye, except, the line leading away from the dot in the center moves sideways instead of upward. This could possibly show the common Chavin practice of making many features of the jaguar into eyes, such as noses and other decorative marks. All of the features mentioned seem to correlate with the earliest Chavin phase, AB. This could show that the bone artifacts recovered from Shillacoto are precursors to the Chavin style, however, it seems more likely that they were trade items. Given the fact that they are small, portable items that were found in a tomb, suggests that they may have been brought in from Chavin de Huantar as an exotic, possibly religious, grave good.



Figure 4. Bone artifacts from tomb in Shillacoto. Photograph by Chiaki Kano, 1979.

The site of Huaca de los Reyes is located at the larger complex known as Caballo Muerto and dates roughly from 1730-850 BC. The construction at Huaca de los Reyes itself has been dated by Thomas Pozorski to around 1300 BC (Pozorski 1995), putting it well before known Chavin influence. This site has the most prominent and numerous occurrence of jaguar motifs of any site in the Initial Period. There are over a couple dozen large clay heads, most over 5 feet tall and all displaying jaguar features, at various points throughout the site (Figure 5). Their ubiquity seems to indicate an importance of this particular motif at this particular part of the Caballo Muerto complex. Most of the heads are quite similar in features and therefore numerous comparisons need not be made. The mouth displays clenched teeth and crossed fangs which terminate at the edges of the lips. The mouth itself is down turned in a frown. The nose is wide and flat and the nostrils flared. The eyes are rectangular and the irises, for the most part, are centered. All of these features correspond with later Chavin phases, notably phases D and EF.

They seem to be more squared off, which is a trait of later Chavin styles, and not rounded, like earlier Chavin styles ( Rowe 1962). Also the down turning of the mouth is a trait seen in later phases of Chavin whereas the earlier phases had mouths that were upturned. The fact that the jaguar heads at Huaca de los Reyes appear to have more in common with later phase Chavin than earlier phase Chavin causes a problem with Pozorski's interpretation of the site. Though his radiocarbon date may be correct, his interpretation that the entire site was built at once (Pozorski 1995) may be incorrect. One possible explanation for the appearance of later Chavin phases at an Initial Period site is reoccupation. It is possible that after the site was abandoned for some time, Chavin people came in, reoccupied the site and created the large clay heads, thus seemingly confusing the record.



Figure 5. Clay head from Huaca de los Reyes. Photograph by Karen Olsen Bruhns, 1994.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the evidence gathered from these three sites, and the sites eliminated from the study, it is clear that there is not much in the way of jaguar motifs in the Initial Period that could possibly be stylistic precursors to the Chavin jaguar. This is not to say it is not possible, the evidence is just too inconclusive at this point to draw any real or meaningful conclusions. The bone artifacts from Shillacoto seem to indicate Chavin origin but recovery of more artifacts at this site could show either more extensive evidence for trade networks or a possible stylistic precursor to the Chavin jaguar. However, at this time it seems that Shillacoto does not exhibit any evidence of a stylistic precursor to the Chavin. The Garagy friezes could indicate a pre-Chavin jaguar but they also may not even be meant as jaguars (as Burger said, at least one is a spider motif) and it could be that our interpretation is wrong. So as it stands, the evidence from Garagay is little and inconclusive. The clay heads at Huaca de los Reyes date to 1300 BC but the style matches with much later dates of Chavin. So either the people that built Huaca de los Reyes were way ahead of their time, or more likely, the site was later re-occupied by the Chavin.

The conclusions reached here are merely theoretical as there is not enough evidence to back up any claims. However, this can serve as a starting point for future research and much of what is said in this study may be proven or disproven with the discovery of new sites or artifacts.

When reading this study, one must keep in mind that only one aspect of the Chavin culture is being taken into account. It is not meant to strip the Chavin of the style or originality that they exhibited, but instead to show that, however creative they were, there may have been previous cultures doing similar things. This alone means we must look into the possibility that

the Chavin either took influence from or grew out of these earlier cultures in many aspects, not simply iconography. In the case of the jaguar motif, it is inconclusive as to whether or not it was pioneered earlier than Chavin times. There is little evidence to suggest it, but just enough to warrant a deeper investigation. The evidence presented in this study, however scant, along with future research may show that the Chavin style jaguar motif was actually pioneered much earlier than previously thought. Future excavation, research and discoveries may prove this theory either right or wrong and may bring to light other aspects of Chavin culture that are borrowed..

It could not be said, based on the one aspect of culture looked at in this study, that the record for the entire Initial Period is incomplete. It may be incomplete in this aspect, or it may be that there are sites and artifacts yet to be found. This brings up another problem encountered in carrying out research for this study. The known sites of the Initial Period have been relatively well studied, yet no recent excavations or studies, later than the late 1980's, have been carried out. With more recent techniques and technologies, much more could potentially be learned about these sites. For example, the excavations of the site of Punkuri have never been published and there has never been any radiocarbon dating done at the site. Doing this could firmly set it in a time period and allow us to learn more about the site and how it related with others. Also, in the case of Huaca de los Reyes, more extensive research could be carried out in order to search for evidence of a Chavin reoccupation of the site. This would help determine why it appears that late phase Chavin art occurs in an Initial Period site. In addition to the jaguar motif, more research could be done into other aspects of Chavin culture, for example architecture, as they too may not have been Chavin inventions. Overall, a more in depth knowledge is needed not only to understand the Initial Period, but how the people living at that time may or may not have

influenced their successors. Looking into these and other questions can help give us a better understanding of the relationships between the people living in this area during the Initial Period and Early Horizon.

APPENDIX A



Figure A1. Lanzon Stela at Chavin de Huantar. Photo by Richard Burger, 1992.

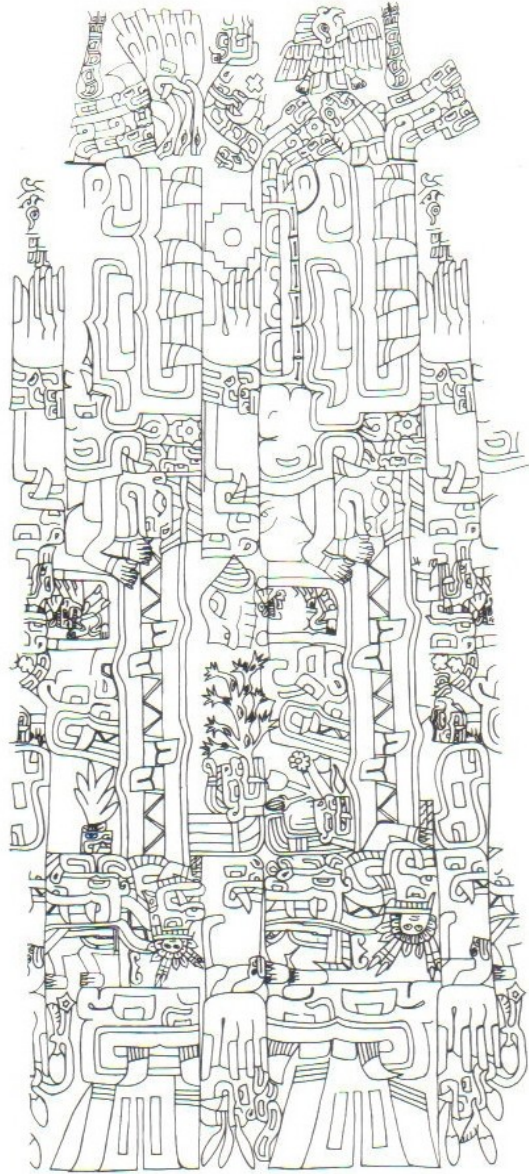


Figure A2. Tello Obelisk. Photo by Richard Burger, 1992.



Figure A3. Black and White Portal. Photo by Richard Burger, 1992.

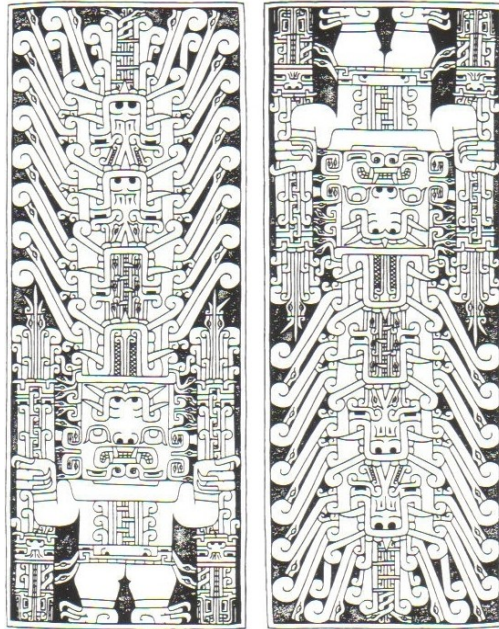


Figure A4. Raimondi Stone. Figure by Richard Burger, 1992.

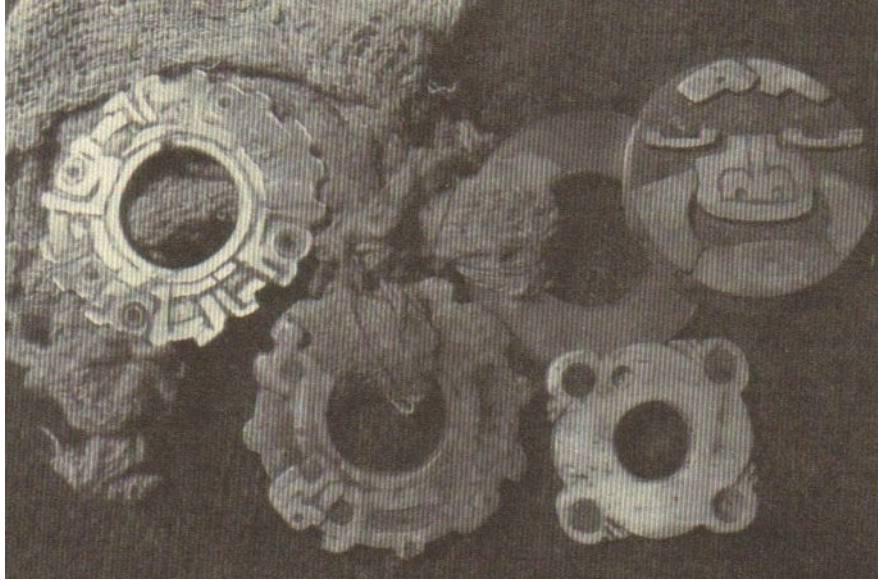


Figure A5. Shell disk from La Galgada. Photo by Terence Grieder, 1988.

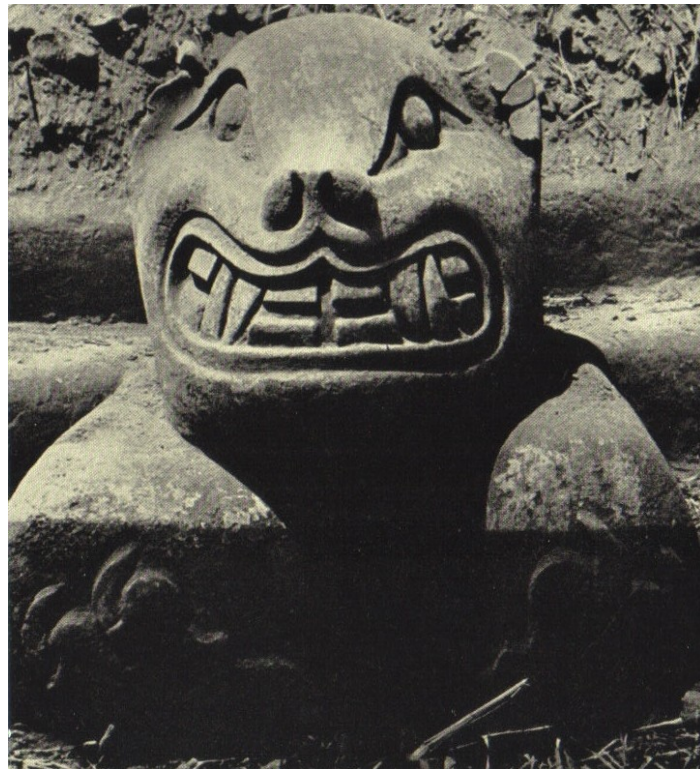


Figure A6. Stone head at Punkuri. Photo by George Kubler, 1962.

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