

CATARPE IN THE ATACAMA DESERT OF CHILE:

The Spirit Site or the Site of the Spirit?

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Abstract

Among many cultural manifestations developed by the people who inhabited our Pre Hispanic America, we find the Incas who stopped their conqueror step and set their eyes on Catarpe, which is an extended meseta (plateau), at the Chilean north, that overlooks the San Pedro River, in the middle of the Atacama Desert.

Attentive to the "site spirit" that detained and met them with its silence and the vastness of its faraway horizons, the Incas built a new settlement that turned out to be both useful and functional at their founding purposes, but also enabled them to give sacred character to the territory full of meanings by means of an architecture that collects and integrates in a whole the space, the matter, the landscape and a particular understanding of the universe that characterized these people worshippers of the sun.

Even today the "site spirit" in Catarpe is still beating, becoming this place in the "site of the spirit", in the place that the memory cannot disappear or move into oblivion.

A Path Arises

It is almost a matter of fact that first people who inhabited America had not in fact their origin in that new world which they attained to reach through the Bering isthmus, towards the end of the Wisconsin period, just before the thaw would have actually increased the oceans level, interrupting the weak track that led by that time, the passing from the north southwards of the world.



So they could endure the rough and the wildness that nature had to offer there, where the North of America joins Asia, displaying a vast land before their eyes, certainly full of promises of new horizons.

From the beginning of the populating, several routes were available and ready to be travelled all over by the new occupants of the continent. Some of them stayed at north, nearby Mexico, others continued towards the south, crossed the tropical regions, forests and mountains arriving to the coldest region of South America, thousands of kilometres from the Bering Strait, by where their ancestors had crossed from the Old World, several centuries before.

First cultural horizons

The very first great American cultural moment is known as the Pre Agro Pottery Period (Period before the Agronomy and the Pottery), and its vestiges are found throughout all America. The cultural state of these first inhabitants that went into this new world fits the description of nomad hunters of Pleistocene fauna, to which they later added harvest and fishing.

It is around 7 thousands years ago that in Mesoamerica arose the beginnings of a great cultural revolution carrying out the earliest crop and cultivating plants to increase their suitability for human requirements. So there were set the basis for the second great cultural period, the Agro Pottery Period, which reached its high point in the high cultures of America, which is Mesoamerica, Central America and the Andean Region. It is precisely in the median zone of the Los Andes Region and in the north of Central America where is the major part of the places that flourished the upper cultures of the new continent.



The first permanent small villages appeared in America in the middle of the second millennium. The most known zones of that period are the central plateau of Mexico as well as the north coast of Peru, where the highest cultural levels of the time were developed. These very first small villages, pre classical and pre urban, were already agricultural and their inhabitants knew the pottery.

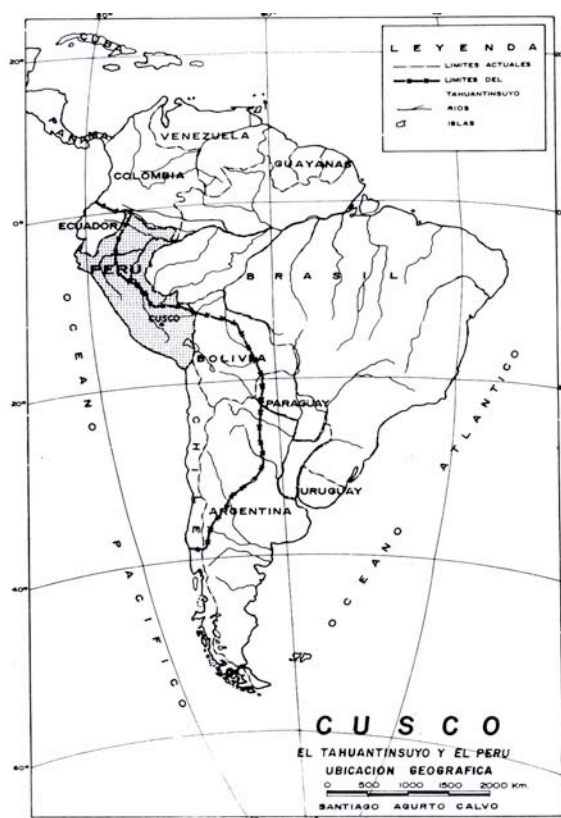
The urban period in the pre Columbian America coincided with the peak of the native cultures named classics. Anyway, the most important cities the Spanish found were somehow recently creations and by large, the result of the imperialist politics carried out by two later civilizations as the Aztec and the Incas.

As they developed, native cultures of America acquired their own characteristics, as it is evident in religion, for example, where these differences show more relevance. The Inca system promoted a State religion, which worships the sun and the moon. The ceremonial places preceded the cities in the areas the urban cultures took place, but they are later the first small villages inhabited by the first farmer groups.

The Incas in the Andean Context

The named Inca State had a late develop in the context of the upper pre Hispanic cultures. In fact, more than a pair of millenniums takes the Inca State apart from the beginning of the civilization in America. In general, the Inca people on the whole, is conceived to begin their peak in the early of the 15th century, as the expression of a genuine and cultural synthesis which would have gathered and assimilated very cleverly, several expressions from other villages sharing with the conditions of the time and space.

The Andean culture has been heterogeneous and even contradictory as time passes by within its vastness and variety of the territory. At the same time few Inca people went from the Titicaca Lake towards the Cuzco valley, where their mythical origin took place, several groups of people got out and resettle in new territories threatening, devastating or making pacts with the native societies of those places.



At the end of the 10th century dc, the named "Later Regional Develops" arise, which means an opportunity for several migratory movements. As María Rostworowsky declares, at that time no central power controlled the ethnic groups, and for unknown issues they went by searching for fertile territories where to settle.

This infrastructure was based basically in an extensive path net in which in the intersection points were located some type of structures suitable to serve large human groups in their movements. Paths should join the main valleys with the uppers,

becoming actually enclaves of cattle and rancher production, taking advantage of a gully or a ravine as a route by which llama caravans travelled loaded of products.



This way also was considered another kind of articulated element of greater hierarchy, in order to link up the remaining paths, which finally should converge to a regional net of routes that led them.

In fact, within this net, in some specific and scattered points of this singular Andean Topography, about each twenty up to thirty kilometres, there were small complex with lodging purpose for the travellers, but its main purpose was to contain with regard to its size and position the production excess, which were kept in the stores, actually deposits designed for these purposes.

They are the "Tambos" (Inn), some of them are so singular as Catarpe, located in the full Atacama Desert and as it was mentioned above, at the sides of the San Pedro River, inside the Antofagasta Region, in a territory that nowadays belongs to Chilean land.

Probably this Tambo of Catarpe could not be understood as well as other Inca architectonic structure, without the essential presence of Camino Real Andino (Andean Real Path), the Qhapac Ñan, a real vital system within inter regional reaching, conceived by the Inca people allowing the efficient integration of an immense and magnanimous territory of more than five thousand kilometres.

The Qhapac Ñan, which own sense and routes by either the coast side or the mountain range crosses in parallel both, the Andean massif and the coast border, realize the Andes Mountain as the joining element getting over a territory that turns out integrated from the control and domain of the movement of the masses of tributary and dependants inhabitants of the central power located in Cuzco, several hundreds of kilometres to the north.



Throw this very circulate system, flows that essential element that allow mainly the developing of the culture: the information among the head and the main parts of this living organism, blooming then in this new continent, one of the most singular expressions of cultures in the world.

Architecture and Inca Urbanism

The early beginning of the Cuzco must not be so unlike of any other small village of the mountain range of the time, about its urban aspect. The great change must have been in the second half of the 15th century, during and after Pachacutec government, the reformer and conqueror Inca. This was in the way that he changed the little Cuzco noble into an empire and the earthenware and straw small village in a planning capital with stone buildings.

It is commonly heard that the appearing of new urban planning criteria that led the replacement of the primitive small village, the new space concepts well seen in sites known as Kanchas (walls), the new techniques and the high quality in the stone parameters was due to the contacts that the Incas established with other cultures during the territorial expansion.

As a territorial planning strategic, the Incas kept their rural and scattered population all over the Tawantinsuyo territory. The Andean planning was based upon the scattering rather than in the building up to urban centres, keeping this way a total domain above the whole geographic space, what meant the maximal productive processes in every available ecological floor.

The purpose of the Andean planning was the generation, management, carrying and distribution of the territorial production, what meant a very good and studied system that could get an optimum displacement and control of the productive procedure. This inter communicative system was very common in the Andean world, but it reached its peak with the Wari society and its maximum splendour with the Inca people.



The urban and architectonic drawn up were in accordance with certain tutelary hills or natural landmarks, which became focal points to orient the disposition and order of the architecture and the drawn up in relation to certain cosmic, planetary, stellar or solar phenomena.

In good terms, an architectonic structure of Inca origin is always referred then to a certain space and cosmic reality, whose comprehension by the Inca constructors led to

welcome certain founding principles from which was possible to organize the spaces, forms and the utilitarian sites but also ceremonial, and although its material constitution responded to a certain function, they too responded to those deities that stealthily resided these taken places by this people always reflecting contrasting signs.



Some of the signs of the Inca architecture

In essence, the architecture for the Inca people was conceived in function of recognizing the presence of certain natural, significant and strategic structures, revealed by the comprehension of the sense of the place and of the natural phenomena that affected them, besides the architectonic structures fundamentally respectful of those significant spaces, almost as an extension destined to celebrate and to honour the previous presence of those natural phenomena.

In accordance to this fact, the Andean culture still keeps legends of important figures such as Manco Cápac for name one, who had in possession magical sticks that at the moment of sinking beneath the surface, he showed the places where to found and settle in the nomadic people.

The legends also refer to the presence of the first ancestors that inhabitant the region of the future Cuzco, whom would have becoming in stones, and from their petrified nature took care of theirs descendents, common belief spread in the Andean region.

Those were unsecured times as it is described in the text "After the Inca track in Chile", of the Pre Columbian Art Museum. So continued several realms and political structures attending to their needs, but they came into conflict and critical points when they could not support the using of their resources and give final solutions to their basic requirements.

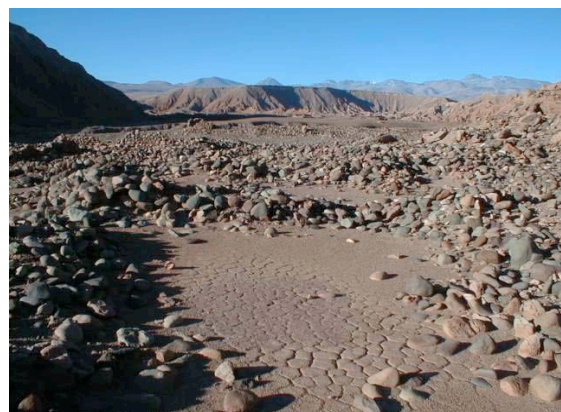
Regarding at the investigations, these conflicts appeared by the generated needs due to the social structure of the Andean political units, which required the collective help to domesticate the roughness of their environment.

The principal mechanism of moving on the human resources for the organization depended mainly in a relative relation way in a common and mutual help idea.

The Catarpe Tambo (Inn): The spirit site or the site of the spirit?

The archaeological site of Catarpe corresponds to a Pre Hispanic architectonic complex of more than 200 ordered sites and, as every Inca enclave, from a series of variables that converge in an intangible way over this place, but they become fundamental at the time of understanding the locating, order and the sense that constitutes it.

Going all over Catarpe leads inevitably to the question that raises in the title, since although is properly the spirit of the place which detained the Inca conqueror in this hidden plateau of the Atacama Desert to raise its Tambo (Inn), what is present nowadays five centuries later here in Catarpe, is the spirit of that founding people which underlies in this stony, quiet and moving site.



Indeed is the "site spirit" what still pulsates in Catarpe, becoming this place in the "site of the spirit", in the place of a memory can not disappear because the spirit does not die and because this place is the invaluable testimony of a splendour and fullness moment that is comprehended in our central part of our past history, ... so our future.

The architecture contains hardly in this singular case, that spirit who rambles among the downcast walls and the scattered stones of this recondite place that is hardly perceived from the bottom of the valley, by where the San Pedro River winds doubtful in its course towards a faraway sea.



It is in this unpredictable place that the Inca people, the most remarkable strategists of the Pre Hispanic world, stop their steps to found another point of welcome and useful rest here for those who cross the conquered territories through the Andean Real Path (Camino Real Andino).

It is also here, in these faraway lands of Kollasuyo and in the heart of a desert landscape and stirring by its distant horizons, where the Inca people comprehend and project the meaning of the place by means of an architecture that is prompt to offer dwelling here in the Earth as well as it occurs in Heaven, to the tutelary spirit of this Catarpe site.

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