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Preliminary Report on Archaeological Research in Tafí del Valle, N.W. Argentina

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Tafí del Valle has an outstanding and almost unique characteristic within the archaeology of northwest Argentina: its monoliths or menhirs, sometimes 4 m. long and exceeding 3 tons in weight. Some of these remains and the surrounding ruins of stone circles are known from the earliest times of archaeological research in that area. In 1897 J. B. Ambrosetti gave a short description of those menhirs (Ambrosetti 1897). He stressed the archaeological differences between the Tafí remains and those of the other areas of the Northwest, ascribing the former to a culture of relative antiquity whose origins were in the Titicaca Basin. The main inferences of Ambrosetti were practically forgotten for more than 50 years, although they were, as we believe, basically correct. Subsequently, Quiroga (1899) gave some information about ruins in La Cienaga and Anfama, ruins which were similar to those of Tafí. Another short report by Lafone Quevedo (1904) added very little or nothing to Ambrosetti's report.

The best and most complete information on the archaeological remains of Tafí is Bruch's publication (1911). Although he was not an archaeologist, Bruch gave an objective description of the monoliths with good drawings and photographs. He did not make any excavation, and his interest was concentrated only on the menhirs and on some scattered material that he was able to see or to purchase.

In spite of the great interest offered by Tafí it was forgotten for many years. Only in 1928 Rodolfo Schreiter visited the menhirs of "El Mollar" and published new pictures of them. Unfortunately, his report has only one page of text and adds very little to our knowledge. Since then the archaeological researches in Tafí have been practically forgotten. Rohmeder studied the human geography of the valley and incidentally refers to the archaeological remains in this area (Rohmeder 1949, 1955). Several of Rohmeder's students have made contributions in the same line (Santamarina 1947). More recently Mrs. Andrés gave a short description of a "pucará" or fortress, the first of its kind to be discovered in the valley (1951). A monograph devoted to the interpretation of the symbolism of the menhirs lacks scientific value (Buffo 1940).

Several objects from Tafí were published by Uriondo (1951). The most complete synthesis on the Tafí Culture was published by Bennett (1948, p. 82, 89). He analysed all the available information about each of the sites of the Tafí Valley and the nearby places, comparing them with those of similar cultures as Anfama,

La Cienaga etc. (op. cit. p. 82). Bennett as well as Ambrosetti believed that the Taffí remains belonged to a distinct culture, Bennett says under the heading "Taffí Culture" (op. cit. p. 89):

"The Taffí Culture is the only complex of archaeological remains in the Central area which cannot be tied in with the others or assigned a place in time".

The main characteristics of this culture, as listed by Bennett, are:

Low pirca walled structures, either rectangular or circular in plan. Carved or undecorated menhirs. Mortars cut either in free pieces of rock or in bed rock. Dolmen-like structures (only in La Cienaga). Settlement patterns of isolated structures scattered in a large area, in contrast with the town-cum-village settlement pattern typical of the Yocavil Culture.

The Taffí culture ceramics were almost unknown because the various authors who worked in the area had overlooked them, Bennett believed that "... future work in the area will unearth a decorated ceramic peculiar to it."

One piece of metal was found in La Cienaga, and a child in an undecorated urn was placed near one of the pirca walled structures.

It was therefore of extreme interest 1) to determine whether the menhirs and constructions of Taffí del Valle really belonged to a different culture, 2) to establish the context of the culture in case that it existed, 3) to determine its temporal range, 4) to establish its relations to the surrounding cultures.

In order to answer these four questions we organized in the "Instituto de Antropología" of the "Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades" of Córdoba's National University an expedition to Taffí del Valle. The expedition was financially supported by a special grant from the "Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas". The excavations were carried out from the beginning of January to the first week of March 1960. We worked with an average of 10 to 19 workmen and were assisted by two graduate students and 10 students from the Faculty.

As Taffí del Valle's main physiographical characteristic is the lack of forest, it being covered only by a short carpet of grass, the use of aerial photography for archaeological purposes was extremely useful. We took several pictures of the valley with the cooperation of the Air Force. In these photographs the archaeological remains could be seen very clearly. We have already referred to them in a special paper (Rex González, 1957). We also used some aerial photographs taken for the provincial topographical survey (Catastro).

The number of ruins and archaeological sites in Taffí is really enormous and an exhaustive investigation of them will require years of work.

We therefore tried to dig the sites where better results could be obtained so as to answer the main questions outlined before. In those sites where no digging could be carried out, we made a superficial collection of material and superficial surveys.

A) Archaeological sites of km. 64—65

In front of the Pabellón hill, between kms. 64 and 66, there is an important archaeological area. Its remains are being destroyed by new constructions on account of the expansion of Taffí village. The main archaeological remains are:

U. a. ... plano, ...
del area ...

a) *Depressions*. They are generally rectangular or circular in plan. The smooth edge protrudes about 50 to 80 cm. out of the surrounding area. The color of the center is green because of the vegetation, while the surrounding edge lacks vegetation, showing loess. Exceptionally groups of stones were found in the out-lining edge.

In this site we found five of these depressions. We excavated part of one and made a small test in a second one.

The depression where we dug had 24.50 m. by 21.20 m. The difference in



Fig. 1. Excavations at S. 4.

Fig. 2. Excavations at S. 4. A circular room.

level between the border and the center was about 80 cm. The digging showed us that the whole rectangle was an artificial depression made by Santamaria-culture-people. It had a small banquet on the northern side. The western side was outlined with stones. A small rectangular enclosure was found within the depression. Some pits, perhaps for storage, were also found on the northern side. It is not possible to establish whether the whole rectangle was roofed but there are some probabilities of its having been one of the communal pit houses like those found in the Belén I culture in Hualfin Valley. Fragments of pottery were abundant. They belong to the Santamaria Bi-and-Tricolor, Famabalasto Black-on-Red and several crude types. It is interesting to notice the appearance of the so-called "pie de compotera" type pot.

b) *Other remains*. A stone group found between km. 64—66 has a diameter of 6 to 8 m. At the beginning of the excavation a skeleton appeared and several Santamaria-type urns were unearthed. This site (S. 3) was 45 m. west of the rectangular depression. No doubt that it was the cemetery of the Santamaria dwelling place we had excavated previously.

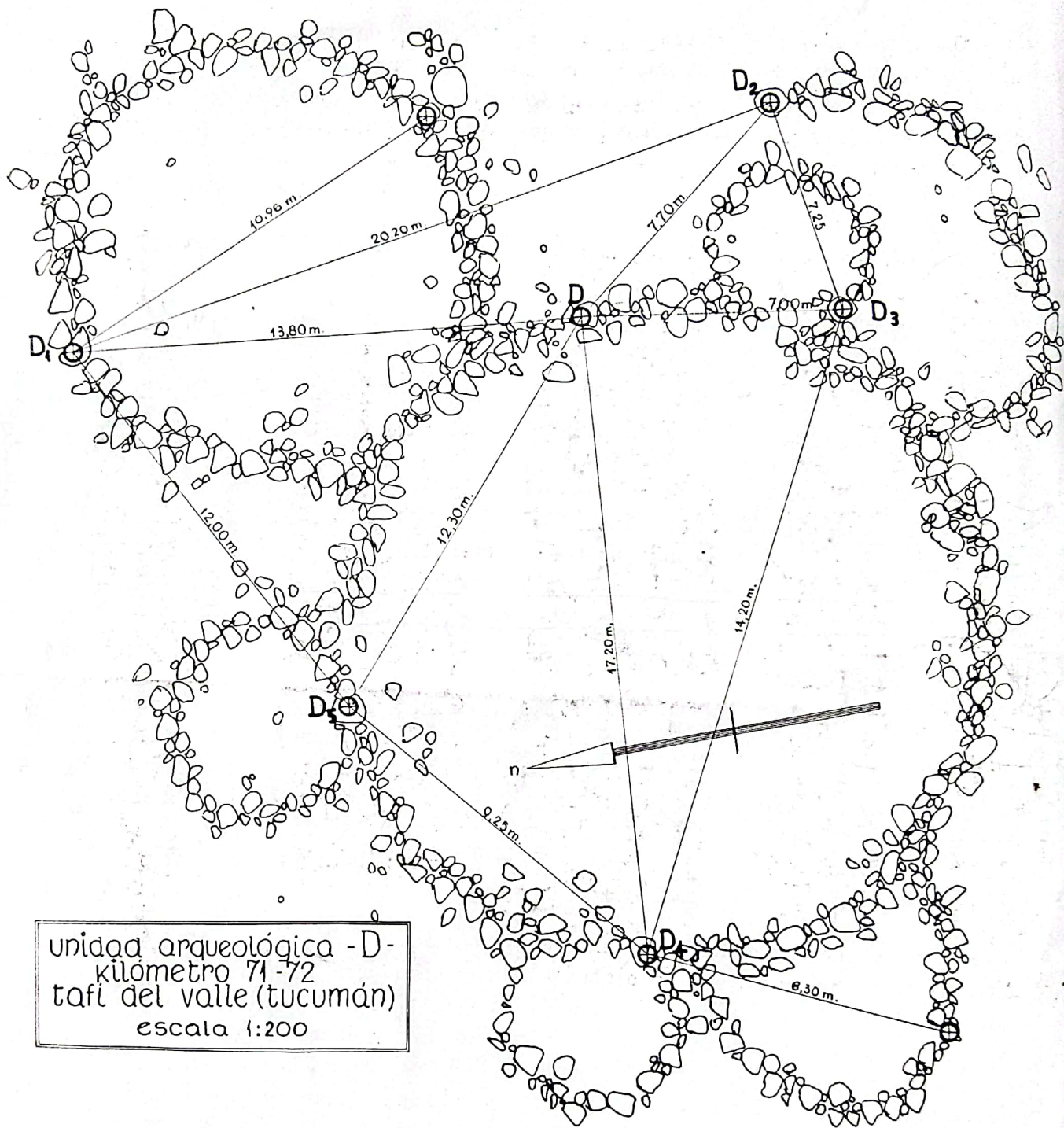


Fig. 3. Groundplan of a site at km. 71.

c) *Stone circles.* Another site excavated in the kms. 64—66 area was one we labelled S. 4. Several stone circles were found here. One of those circles measured 10—12 m. in diameter, two others 3—4 m. They were incomplete and formed by only a single line of stones. In the biggest circle some of the stone blocks were quite large, measuring almost 1 m. in diameter. The whole of the big circle and the two smallest ones were excavated.

The digging showed that the small circles were rooms connected by doors with the bigger one. (Figs 1. and 2). These rooms had a fireplace and were covered with a roof of branches and clay according to some remains recovered during the digging. The big stone-circle proved to be a burial place. Several stone-cists with adult skeletons were found, and several jars, one with the bones of a child in it,



Fig. 4. — a, menhir from El Mollar; b, c, monoliths with feline motifs; d, e, carved slab and anthropomorphic figure from Tafi del Valle (Collection J. Frias Silva). Figures are not reduced in proportional scale.

were unearthed. There also appeared numerous stone mortars and stone mills (conanas or metates) of the U depression-type.

Very interesting is the fact that the few Santamaria-type sherds were found only superficially; they did not appear beyond the depth of 10—20 cm. On the floor of the two rooms and in the big circle only crude pottery or few sherds of Candelaria-related types of gray pottery were found. In the stone-cists some complete pots which are also related to the Candelaria pottery were found. The

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crude pottery has as a main characteristic its coarse paste, conical or subconical bottom and door-knob-like handles. *hondo, loco*

Some other material discovered during the digging in this site includes:

Fragments of 3/4 grooved axes. Conical "bolas". "Manos". Two metal rings.

The same pottery types as found in S. 4 were also found on the bottom of another room of circular plan excavated in the same area (S. 6) and on the bottom of a test pit dug out nearby. One stone wall of the room of S. 6 is more than 2 m. high and very carefully finished.

B) Archaeological site at km. 71

In this area exist several archaeological sites. Each has one to four stone circles from 10—18 m. in diameter. Around these circles 3 to 6 others with a diameter of 3—5 m. are arranged. (Fig. 3). The main group of circles is found between km. 71 and 72.

Some digging was done inside these circles. In one of them the superficial stone ring proved to be the excellently built wall of a room. It was constructed with carefully selected blocks and had a *neto*, quite regular and symmetrical surface. The actual height of this wall is 1.30 m. but it must have been more than 2 m. high according to the considerable amount of fallen blocks found near its base. The filling of the room was formed mainly by black humus, especially near the surface, but the black color changed in the deeper levels to light brown. This humus contained a considerable amount of pottery sherds. They belong to crude types similar to those found in S. 4 of km. 64.

Some plain polished gray sherds and black polished ones with incised decoration appeared together with crude pottery. Among the handles appeared the same door-knob type as found in S. 4. Some charred seeds and a small amount of animal bones were all the archaeological elements recovered here. After a partial excavation of two rooms we had to give up our digging because of a progressive flooding of the rooms, due to the action of superficial water in this area at this time of the year.

C) El Mollar *S. 4 and 6*

The archaeological remains scattered around "El Mollar" are the most important of the whole Tafí valley. A considerable number of menhirs, stone enclosures, terraces, pit houses, a group of circles similar to those found on km. 64 and 71 are found here.

The most important groups of remains are on both sides of the Mollar river which comes from Potrerillo and El Rincon. On the right side between the house of Frias Silva's estancias and the river's "barrancas" is found the group of menhirs described by Ambrosetti and Bruch. Only four of the menhirs are still in place, others were removed from the original location where they were at the time of the visits of the above-mentioned archaeologists.

The second group of menhirs is found on the left bank of the river, facing the hill that in Schreiter's map (Schreiter 1928, pl. XLII) is called "Divisadero". This

is one of the many hills that form the "Pelado" in the center of the valley. It is no more than 80 m. high. Between the slope of this hill and the river there is a small plain. The whole of it is literally covered with archaeological remains. Among them there are thousands of stone lines that mark the sites of ancient agricultural terraces. These are predominantly straight but there are also some curved ones. The stone lines are laid transversally to the slope of the hill. They form among them angles and various geometric figures.

Scattered on the terraces are found three or four groups of stone circles. These groups are composed of a big center-circle (diameter: 12—18 m.) with several smaller ones around it; they are of exactly the same type as those found on Km. 64 and 72 and are dwelling places of the Tafi Culture.

Another type of archaeological structures here are those of rectangles marked on the ground by different colors of the sediments and vegetation. They are similar to those excavated on Km. 64 and probably belong to the Santamaria culture.

The surface-collection on the sites produced the usual amount of pottery sherds. Predominantly crude types without paint or any decoration were found, in the second place also Santamaria-type sherds and, moreover, one sherd of Condorhuasi Polychrome.

In front of the property of Sr. A. Machado we found the same type of remains as already described, with terraces, sometimes constructed with big blocks, and several stone circles. In the center of this plain there is an artificial mound. It is very strange that the archaeologists who worked here did not pay any attention to this important structure; they did not even mention it. Only on Schreiter's map (op. cit. 1928, p. XLII) there is a point marked "La Apacheta" that perhaps may correspond to this mound. But his map is so inaccurate that it is difficult to be sure that he really tried to plot the mound. It is, however, very important that the menhirs of the left bank were distributed around this mound at a distance of 50 to 200 m.

A group of menhirs is near the hut (rancho) of Mamaní on the west side of the mound. They were photographed by Schreiter (op. cit. p. LXIV). Two of them were carved. Another group was near the Escuela Vieja; they are mentioned and illustrated by Bruch (1911, p. 9.), who found several still standing up. All of them, also the group mentioned before, were removed from the original place.

A third group, that was never mentioned before, was on the S. W. of the mound on the flat surface of the hill, west of the "Divisadero". Here we found two new menhirs. (Fig. 4 a).

The Mound

This artificial mound rises on the flat surface that is now called "La Plaza". It is about 30 m. long and 3 m. high. On the surface appeared an enormous amount of boulders, the size of a fist to a child's head. Together with the boulders appeared humus and a considerable amount of pottery sherds. The absolutely predominant types were those of crude sherds and some painted in red; only few painted sherds are of the Santamaria type. The crude sherds are quite similar to handles similar to those found at km. 64 (S. 4) and km. 71.

can to
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The mound was carefully tested. First a trench was opened along its longitudinal axis from the south end to the center on the highest point. After this a second trench was opened following the transversal axis and starting from the center on the highest point. The deepest level reached in our trenching was 3,20 m; most of this trench was dug preserving a careful stratigraphy with levels of 50 cm. After the two main trenches were completed a third trench was opened following the lateral axis, parallel to the longitudinal axis.

The internal structure of the mound is quite complicated. There are two main groups of layers. One more superficial from 0 to 1.70 m. which contained a great amount of humus, boulders, pottery and some animal bones. The second group from 1.70 to 3.20 m. contained humus, charcoal, ashes, pottery sherds and charred animal bones; boulders are less frequent. Each one of these two divisions contains several layers as follows:

- I. 1) 0 to 30 cm: Humus and boulders of small and regular size.
- 2) 30 to 170 cm: Great amount of pottery fragments and boulders of small size.
- II. 3) Ash-layers well defined, more clearly towards the center of the mound. Great amount of charred bones. Boulders of medium size. Sherds in less quantity than in the preceding layers.
- 4) Darker than 3). Charcoal, charred bones, same amount of pottery sherds as in 3). Abundant camelid bones.
- 5) Big boulders. Few bones.
- 6) Natural base of sand and clay.

The following archaeological specimens were recovered from the digging: Pottery sherds, pipes (some of them with zoomorphic figures), spindle whorls, chips (fichas de juego), zoomorphic figures, stone-axes with 3/4 groove, projectile points, perforated pieces of mica. Bone-material: projectile points, needles, awls, spoons. One small piece of metal, probably copper. The sherds are predominantly of crude types. In the interior of the mound no Santamaria-types were found. Together with the crude types appeared some smoothed or polished sherds, painted with red color. The only polychrome sherds were those belonging to the Condorhuasi Polychrome or Condorhuasi Tricolor, but on a total amount of several thousands of crude or red painted types, only three of them were found. Some few sherds are decorated with very peculiar incised zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures. The shapes of the pottery are very simple with predominant conical bottom and in part with handles similar to those found at km. 64 (S. 4) and km. 71.

Two complete human skeletons and several scattered human bones were found in the mound. The skull of one of them is artificially flattened at the occipital bone, the so-called "tabular erecta" artificial deformation according to Imbelloni's nomenclature.

Besides the digging in the mound we partially excavated a big stone circle 20 m. in diameter on "La Plaza" or Casas Viejas. Almost in the center of this circle two menhirs were unearthed. (Fig. 5.). One of them is worked to a regular form, but has no figure engraved on its surface. The second one, 3.12 m. long, has a carved anthropomorphic face, and at its inferior end starts a snake figure. A very peculiar feature is the presence of red paint, possibly of mineral origin, around the engraving.

Menhirs

Among the menhirs mentioned in the archaeological literature, we found two engraved and ten plain ones. Besides these we discovered in our digging or on the surface, or else in private property six more carved menhirs and seven plain ones. Some of the carved menhirs show features almost unknown before, and characteristics that perhaps point to resemblances with monoliths as far away as the Titicaca Basin.

A very well defined characteristic of one of the newly discovered carved menhirs is the feline decoration, showing a typical feline face and the circular spots of the jaguar skin. (Fig. 4, 6). Some of the plain menhirs still preserve the feline ears protruding on the top. Several menhirs have a groove around the superior end. This groove could have been used to tie a rope around it that kept in place some kind of ornaments, as feathers, branches or something similar.

Tafí Culture

The main objective of our expedition was to define the cultural entity that had been suspected by Ambrosetti and Bennett but whose elements were practically unknown. In Bennett's outline no more than ten items were ascribed to the Tafí Culture. We can now describe the cultural context of Tafí in the following manner:

Settlement Patterns: Pirca walls found on the surface. Each settlement unit is formed by one to three big stone circles of 10 to 20 m. in diameter. On the periphery of these circles one to six or even more small circles are found, 2—5 m. in diameter. Each of these units is separated from the others by a distance of several meters. Sometimes the units cover a great extension. The digging revealed that the big central circle was the place of daily home work, such as milling, etc., and also the place where the dead were buried. The small circles were rooms whose walls reached sometimes a height of more than 2 m. The roof was made of branches and clay. Very big blocks of rock were sometimes used for the construction of the walls. The settlement pattern suggests a group like an extended family or something similar.

Economy: Agriculture was the basis of the economy. Numerous "andenes" or terraces, with well developed irrigation system. Metates and manos of different types, predominantly those of triangular section. Predominance of metates of U-shaped cross-section. Probable use of the llama.

Stone material: Sling stones, grooved axes, mortars, communal mortars (?), scarce or exceptional use of projectile points, smoking pipes, anthropomorphic pipes, quadrangular hammers, perforated stones of unknown use, pear-shaped bolas of small size, slate knives, stone animal effigies, use of feline effigy.

Menhirs of different types: 1. Plain a) worked to give a regular shape. b) simple long crude blocks, undecorated. 2. Carved a) with geometric design, straight-lined motives. b) with anthropomorphic or zoomorphic motives, curved lines.

Big stone circles or enclosures. Monoliths marking the entrance of the enclosure. Monoliths used as pillars.

9th century

Pottery: Absolute predominance of crude types. Use of coarse grit. Shapes with conical bottom, flat or slightly concave. Pitcher with a vertical handle.

Door-knob handle. Painted red monochrome pottery, scarce gray or black polished pottery. Condorhuasi Polychrome and Condorhuasi Tricolor intrusive. Tobacco pipes of pottery. Tubular pipes (?). Ocarina (only one specimen).

Textile: Clay spindle-whorls, very crude type.

Metal: Only three small specimens were found, small rings or fragments of a plaque.

Bone material: Needles with ears, flute, awls, spoon; decorated fragments of bone.

Funeral customs: Adults buried in stone cists in flexed position. Poor funeral offerings. Children buried in urns. Burial place near the rooms.

Religion and Belief: Extended use of the feline motive; menhirs, stone vessels, sculpture, etc. Use of ceremonial mound (?) with the group of menhirs suggesting a ceremonial place of great importance. The amount of work required for carving and transport suggests some social tie to unite efforts among the different scattered groups of families. This is also suggested by the irrigation work and agricultural terraces. But the funeral customs fail to confirm the existence of any social stratigraphy. Perhaps the social grouping was only based on religious and economic aspects.

Race: No somatic study has been done yet. The few skeletons suggest the Andide type. Skull deformation of "tabular erecta" type.

Subdivisions of Tafi Culture

There is no doubt that the Tafi culture existed in the valley for a long period of time. Future work will have to find out the elements that can be used as marks of sub-periods. The excavations carried out show already that sites S. 4 (km. 64) and km. 71, although belonging to the same basic culture, differ to some extent. This can be attributed to difference in date. In S. 4 and km. 71 we have no red painted pottery at all or only very little of it. In the "Mollar" mound the pottery handle of the door-knob type is almost unknown or is different, and there is no incised black pottery either. In km. 64 (S. 4) were found several stone cist burials with Cienaga and Candelaria pots. Therefore the contemporaneousness of the three cultures is assumed. In El Mollar there is no such kind of pottery. Instead, we found some Condorhuasi Polychrome and a type of red pottery with zoomorphic incised designs, that perhaps indicates the influence of some unknown culture contemporary with the respective period of Tafi.

Age of Tafi Culture

An approximate absolute age of Tafi culture will be known when some of the charcoal samples have been tested for their C. 14 contents. However, some predictions can be ventured: According to some few sherds the formation of the mound was in progress at the time of the existence of Condorhuasi pottery. Since two

radiocarbon dates place this type of pottery between 1580 and 1620 years ago (Rex Gonzalez, 1960, p. 145), we may suppose that a part of Tafi Culture was not far off from these dates. The importance of Tafi Culture within the early agricultural and pottery-making period of Northwest Argentine had until now been underestimated.

A similar culture, although without the characteristic menhirs, extended probably to North and Central Catamarca and also to the Laguna Blanca region. The Alamito Culture has in one of its subdivisions — perhaps at the beginning — strong resemblances with the Tafi Culture, especially in the extensive use of crude pottery types, stone carvings, use of menhirs, etc. Also, the settlement pattern of a small group of rooms around a circular “patio” is common to both cultures. But together with these similarities there are also marked differences as to the type of rooms, the specific stone carvings of the Alamito, etc. Perhaps both cultures have a common root related to the culture that in southern Bolivia has been called “Cultura de los Túmulos” or Megalitica.

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