

DESTABILIZING MEANING IN ANTHROPOMORPHIC FORMS FROM NORTHWEST ARGENTINA

by

Benjamin Alberti*

Abstract:

There are ways of stabilizing meanings in some forms rather than others, and stabilizing meanings is a very material practice.

Donna Haraway

A recent advert for modern furniture by Cassina asks, “Why do we fall in love with objects if they cannot requite our feelings”? Archaeological objects do requite our feelings - through the work we do to them and the manner of our engagement with them. The nature of this cathexis, mixed up as it is in a specific visual aesthetic, can be understood as decidedly modern. The careful separation of pots from people, and then the isolation of meaning and form, ceremonial practice from mundane function, and then their final display in print, the digital world, or museums are all complicit in this process. The pots I address here – a series of anthropomorphic forms from the Candelaria and San Francisco cultures of Northwest Argentina – have suffered from this anatomizing disassociation of their parts. I attempt to reassemble these parts into contingent forms, arguing that notions of transformation are constitutive of their materiality. These assemblages worked materially to stabilize such notions, but do not necessarily represent stable categories themselves. Ultimately, these objects must still requite our feelings, but can they do so in motion, disturbing ontologies of nature/culture?

Key words: Northwest Argentina; anthropomorphic vessels; perspectivism.

Resumo:

Há modos de estabilizar sentidos numas formas em vez de outras, e estabilizar sentidos é uma prática muito material.

Donna Haraway

Uma publicidade relativa a mobiliário moderno de Cassina pergunta: “Por que é que nos apaixonamos por objectos se eles não podem corresponder aos nossos sentimentos?” Os objectos arqueológicos correspondem de facto aos nossos sentimentos – através do trabalho que neles fazemos e da maneira como nos envolvemos com eles. A natureza desta “kathexis”, mesclada como está com uma visao estética específica, pode ser vista como claramente moderna. A separação cuidadosa de potes e de pessoas, e assim o isolamento do sentido e da forma, da prática cerimonial e da função mundane, e finalmente a sua apresentação em forma impressa, o

* Framingham State College, Department of Sociology, 100 State Street, Framingham, MA 01701, USA.
E-mail: balberti@frc.mass.edu

mundo digital, ou os museus, são todos cúmplices deste processo. Os potes a que me reporto aqui – uma série de formas antropomórficas provenientes das “culturas” de Candelaria e de San Francisco do Noroeste da Argentina – sofreram com esta dissociação anatomizadora das suas partes. Tento voltar a juntar estas partes em formas contingentes, defendendo que a sua materialidade incluiu, como elemento constituinte, noções de transformação. Estes conjuntos funcionaram materialmente para estabilizar tais noções, mas não representam necessariamente, eles próprios, categorias estáveis. Em última análise, estes objectos podem ainda corresponder aos nossos sentimentos, mas podem fazê-lo de forma dinâmica, perturbando ontologias de natureza/cultura?

Palavras-chave: Noroeste da Argentina; recipientes antropomórficos; perspectivismo.

INTRODUCTION

I am fascinated by the pot in Figure 1 and others like it. I have photographs of similar vessels on my office door, my office walls, my background on my laptop. Pots like this were discovered and collected from Northwest Argentina from the late nineteenth century onwards. Often they contained skeletal remains, artifacts, and other organic material. It is striking, however, in how many accounts of early archaeologists one reads a line such as, “Eleven sepulchral urns were recovered; skeletal material discarded” (e.g. see Rydén, 1936). The artifacts and urns themselves were kept, but the other elements were usually discarded. Huge collections of this material made their ways into national museums, private collections, and abroad to foreign collectors and museums, such as the Zaveleta collection in the Field Museum in Chicago (Scattolin, 2003), the Schreiter collection at the Vienna Folk Museum (Becker-Donner, 1952; 1953) and the Schreiter and Rydén collections in the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum (Muñoz, 1999; Stenborg and Muñoz, 1999). There they remain, isolated from their original contexts for which information is often missing, atomized, separated, occasionally studied and drawn or photographed, but mainly resting in deposits or on display. The best examples might appear in the occasional publication on pre-Colombian art (e.g., see González, 1977; Goretti, 2006).

In this paper I make three interconnected points, which are cautionary, interpretive, and methodological in nature respectively. First, that the very reason we enjoy studying archaeological materials might actually get in the way of understanding the place such materials had in past worlds. Second, that notions of matter as a stable substrate to peoples’ interaction with the world may have been absent from first millennium AD Northwest Argentina. Rather, the idea of bodies as transformative can be seen as constitutive – “transformable” is their natural condition. To make this argument I draw on anthropological writings on indigenous Amazonian concepts of bodies and matter. And third, that the way we see and piece together archaeological evidence is impacted by the ideas we have about nature/culture, bodies and matter. By exploring an alternative set of understandings we are provoked into re-thinking

the way in which we make patterns from the archaeological evidence. One outcome of my argument is that we must question the assumption that material things provide stable referents for, and objectify in any durable sense, social relations if that material is not itself considered stable or trustworthy.

We clearly invest great mental and emotional energy in a particular way of thinking about the past. Furthermore, we are heirs to a tradition that relied on specific aesthetic criteria for presenting that past. This aesthetic has resulted in a particular type of archaeological practice and presentation (see Jones, 2001). A recursive relationship exists between separating particular pots – or any artifacts – from their context, and treating them as bounded, completed objects. There are numerous ways in which this particular commitment to our materials impacts what we say about them. Two points in particular emerge in terms of how the material from Northwest Argentina has been interpreted. First, there has been an over-emphasis on certain material types, to the extent that other materials have been ignored or destroyed. Hierarchies of materials also exist, from the “crude” and uninteresting to the “fine,” with its key role in marking culture. Materials have been kept very much apart. Second, matter – the “obdurate” physical world – has been treated as the relatively uninteresting and stable backdrop to cultural action, which acts on it. Artistic works are understood to “express” belief systems and ideas in the minds of makers. Works both “stand for” particular ideas (which we must decipher) and stand for the general achievement of a particular group of people. In fact, to think of matter as some form of stable background to human action, in which form is carved out of an inert substance, is to prioritize and impose a modern metaphorical construction onto potentially different understandings of the world (see Thomas, this volume). Starting from the premise that our culture/nature dualism need not have informed people’s understandings of ontologies of matter in the Eastern Valleys of Formative Period Northwest Argentina, I argue that the material to do with bodies (human, pots, animal) demonstrates a general concern with the instability of matter. This is understood not as a reversal of modern notions, but as a specific instance in which the material world was recognized as historical and contingent rather than fixed and a priori. Archaeological support for my argument comes from the fantastical shapes and forms of anthropomorphic ceramic vessels, as well as evidence of material corporeal practices.

FORMATIVE NORTHWEST ARGENTINA

Northwest Argentina is the richest area in the country for traditional archaeological remains, including some monumental architecture, a kaleidoscope of different archaeological cultures, and the beginnings of agriculture and sedentarism, the evidence

for which goes back at least 3000 years (for general accounts, see Berberían and Nielson, 2001; Stenborg, 1999; Tarragó, 2000). Geographically, the area ranges from the puna or Andean high plateau, through intermediate valleys and sierras, to forests and plains. Subsistence was based on llama pastoralism, agriculture, and foraging. Over time an elaborate exchange network built up, focusing on ceramics, obsidian and other raw materials, foodstuffs, and hallucinogens. A large part of the area was eventually subjugated by the Inca before succumbing to Spanish rule in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Early collectors and archaeologists were fascinated by the elaborate funerary urns and other pots from the area. Expeditions were mounted that uncovered ceramic traditions going back to well before the current era and a remarkable range of ceramic, stone, and metalwork in which the human figure was combined with non-human elements and fantastic zooanthropomorphic creatures and shapes (e.g. Ambrosetti, 1906; Boman, 1908; Nordenskiöld, [1903] 1993). Stylistic and stratigraphic variation among these materials has served as the basis for the building of chronologies and distinct cultures for the area. The imagery itself is treated as both representational and as a vehicle for ethnic and political identity. Predominance of a new form, style, or iconography is taken as evidence of the ideological dominance of cultural newcomers.

Some Argentinean archaeologists are beginning to challenge the notion that ceramic styles represent clear-cut social groups (Berón, 2006; Lazzari, 2005; Scattolin, 2004; Scattolin and Lazzari, 1998; Williams, 2006). For example, Lazzari (2005, 145) argues that the fluidity in form in the imagery, especially the human/non-human variety, and the diversity in types of ceramic and the sites where they are found, can be seen as “embodying the fluidity of social relations networks in a fixed form.” Lazzari makes her point in relation to the ceramic forms and imagery from the Formative period, roughly the first millennium AD in Northwest Argentina, which is also the subject of my work. The Formative period is considered to encompass roughly the first millennium AD, depending on the location. This period is characterized by the appearance of the first sedentary communities, none of which get particularly large or agglomerated, and the development of extensive trade networks. As Lazzari (2005, 148) notes in relation to the period, there is never again in the region such a “proliferation of objects, material images, and socio-spatial relations.”

In her analysis, Lazzari argues for different “genres” of material that intersected in particular ways and played distinct roles in the constitution of social networks and worlds. In her scheme, the circulation of obsidian stressed fluidity across social borders which ceramics attempted to solidify. The ceramics were both complex social actors (in the sense implied by Gell, 1998; although see critique in Russell, this volume) and representational projects – the embodiment of shared views and images. The ceramics “solidify social relations” through their mobility and design,

shaping future interaction (Lazzari, 2005, 147). I find her analysis fruitful in thinking about the larger social universe of the period. Fluidity of form, I believe, is key to understanding this material. However, while the contrast between obsidian and ceramic circulation is clearly significant, by stressing the relative durability of one form over the other I suspect we may be limiting the way we understand ceramic as a particular type of material. Is durability essential to the so-called “materiality” of ceramics? Would this not be to assume a correspondence between sensible world and social world? Thinking of ceramics as necessarily durable, or necessarily fixed forms, may be thinking of the thing – the pot – as a fixed and stable outcome of social exchange or production, rather than a continued presence in such relations.

I depart from Lazzari’s argument, drawing on both the fluidity of form that she recognizes in the ceramic corpus, and certain practices evidenced in the deposition of human remains. I argue that such fluidity, rather than merely indicating fluid social relations between groups, may also be evidence for relations between many potential beings – humans and non-humans – and a general concern with the ongoing transformational and unstable character of the world itself.

AMAZONIAN CORPOREALITIES: “CHRONICALLY UNSTABLE BODIES”

The particular archaeological cultures I am concerned with are the San Francisco and La Candelaria cultures (or complexes) from formative period Northwest Argentina. These occupy a special position in the archaeology of the area (see Fig. 2). They are at once figured as the “primitive and dangerous” origins and the “poor relatives” of the other Northwest cultures. This is largely to do with their location, which is slightly ambiguous in terms of the meta-areas of the Andes and Amazon. They just miss the main valleys and sierras of the Andes, lying within the so-called Eastern Valleys, or “Yungas,” with connections to the vast Lowlands to the east (see contributors to Ortiz and Ventura, 2003). The east has been seen as the source of negative dangerous influences – waves of invaders, and so on – while the Andes has been painted as the origin of the fine arts, agriculture, and social complexity. There are undoubtedly important influences on Northwest Argentinean cultures that have arrived from the East, but the nature of their arrival has been considered largely bellicose, as opposed to the assumed beneficence of cultural influence from the Andean highlands. There is surely a lingering bias in interpretations that continue to support this model, which exists within other broad schemes of difference, such as male (highlands): female (lowlands), and can be correlated with a general lack of recent research in the lowlands as opposed to the areas to the west (Scattolin, 2004).

While many elements of the material evidence from the area are linked to the Andean region, there is equally clearly a strong connection to lowland groups, especially in the material from the Eastern Valleys. Furthermore, recent work has stressed that it is crucial to examine the region from a macro-regional perspective, in which the lowlands are no longer considered “marginal” to the Andean hinterland (Ventura and Ortiz, 2003). I’d like to reintroduce the Amazon into this debate in the form of recent ethnographies concerning bodies and things. It may be that these provide a more adequate model for the engagement between the archaeological populations of the area and their material and representational worlds. In fact, a similar strategy has been employed even within the “heartland” of Northwest Argentinean archaeology, the Ambato Valley, considered one of the homes of the Aguada, apparent heirs of Andean traditions, who were around between the sixth and eleventh centuries AD. Laguens and Gastaldi (2006) usefully employ contrasting notions of materiality/interiority, and other concepts developed by Philippe Descola in relation to his work among Amazonian communities. Working chiefly with iconography, Laguens and Gastaldi reveal the significance of Amerindian notions of human-non-human relations, and crucially, distinct ontologies generated by particular ways of identifying with nature. As such, my use of concepts crystallized in Amazonian ethnographies is, I believe, an appropriate heuristic device, one which will enable a broadening of the interpretive possibilities of the material from the Formative Period Eastern Valleys. I argue that two broad classes of archaeological evidence – material associated with manipulation of the human body and anthropo- and zoomorphic forms – can be usefully related to two broad ideas about bodies and matter from recent ethnographies: that bodies in Amazonian society are never self-evident and are inherently transformable.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1992; 1998; 2004) is well known for his work on Amerindian perspectivism, the notion that one’s view (or perspective) on reality depends on the body one occupies. Humans and animals view the world in radically different ways as a result, each potentially viewing themselves as “humans” and the rest of the world as animals. Thus, there exists a general suspicion of external form (see also Storrie, 2003). Viveiros de Castro understands exchange to drive this system, and ontological predation – the domination of one perspective of the world by another – is its chief characteristic. He suggests that this worldview can be characterized as that of one culture and multiple natures; or one epistemology and multiple ontologies (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, 474). All beings are linked by a common humanity, but are divided by nature, by the bodies they occupy. You know who is kin or who is human to you because you share behaviors and affects rooted in the body. Inter-specific predation can occur when one’s spirit (one’s physical form from another perspective) is hunted as prey. Shamans occupy key positions in being able to mediate between worlds, either convincing each group of their common

humanity, or reciprocating this “ontological predation” by assuming the perspective of the other and hence knowledge of them. It is not the case that there are multiple perspectives on the same physical world; rather, there is one way of knowing and multiple worlds to be known. There is no single, fixed substrate that we would understand as “matter” that unites these worlds.

Aparecida Vilaça (2005) develops Viveiros de Castro’s arguments in conjunction with her own work among the Wari’ of Western Rondônia, Brazil. Agreeing with Viveiros de Castro that in many Amazonian societies, “There is no pre-given natural or objective universe” (Vilaça, 2005, 456), she introduces the notion of the “chronically unstable body” to explore the connection between two apparently conflicting ideas held by the Wari’. They, like other Amazonian groups, spend a great deal of time, effort and care in “making kin” – the body is slowly and continuously fabricated through specific rites of sharing, and so on. Yet, they fear the dangers of transformation of perspective, the fact that at any moment they could be the victims of ontological predation. Why go to such lengths to “make” bodies if they are in such immanent danger of being lost to another perspective? Instead of working with the idea of the “fabrication” of bodies, therefore, Vilaça stresses their inherent transformability. This care, then, is not so much about marking a self-evident biological body through cultural practices, as it is about the negation of the possibility of the non-human body. Such modifications are seen as part of normal physiological processes rather than opposed to them (Vilaça, 2005, 448).

To distinguish the concept of fabrication from that of transformation, Vilaça (2005, 449-50) contrasts the English word “body” with the Wari’ concept of *kwere*. The Wari’ word *Kwere* can be interpreted as body, as in flesh, but also implies a specific mode of acting, a “way of being.” A wind blows strongly because the *kwere* of the wind is thus. Conklin (2001), who also works among the Wari’, upon asking why a young woman misbehaved in the way she did, was told, “Thus is her body.” For Wari’ to say “It is our custom” is to say “Thus are our bodies that we truly are” (Conklin, 2001, 137). *Kwere* therefore implies a specific mode of acting, a “way of being” (Vilaça, 2005, 449); it is a set of affections and behaviors rather than primarily a physical substrate.

Souls are the root of instability of bodies for they are the shared humanity of all beings and thus link humans to other ontologies. Soul is *jam*. Wari’ define as human or potentially human all living beings possessive of *jam*- (Vilaça, 2005, 452-3; Conklin, 2001). The verb “to *jamu*” indicates the ability to change affection and adopt other habits, to be perceived as similar by other types of being, and hence succumbing to their perspective of oneself. Shared practices of care are about fixing the souls firmly within the body. The potential for transformation must be annulled for a specific form to humanity to emerge. Vilaça (2005, 450) argues that approaches

that see the body as a “substance impregnated with dispositions and affects” have it backwards. Rather, a person’s physical state is, “a way of being actualized in bodily form.” The body is thus open and vulnerable to metamorphic activity – it is chronically unstable.

INTERPRETING LA CANDELARIA AND SAN FRANCISCO

Stabilizing bodies

Lazzari (2005) argues that the ceramic and obsidian evidence from Formative northwestern Argentina indicates a general fluidity in social relations networks. I would extend her argument and say that the notion of transformability and the idea of “chronically unstable bodies” – both human and other – may be wrapped up in the generation of practices and forms apparent in the archaeological material. There is evidence of a general concern with the stability of bodily forms and their transformation as foundational in the archaeological material from Northwest Argentina.

The San Francisco culture or tradition is one of the earliest in the area to produce relatively “nice” pots, including imagery of humanoid forms on urns and pipes (for general accounts, see Serrano, 1962; Ortiz, 2003). The Candelaria material is – as far as we know – contemporary but slightly later to arrive (see Baldini, *et al.* 2003; Heredia, 1968; 1975). Human forms appear in the ceramics in many different ways among the Candelaria, but rarely on urns or pipes. There are clear affinities between the two areas in terms of ceramic production, style, and so on. There are also clear differences that I am sure relate to different practices and perhaps worldviews. A finer-grained analysis would enable material from the two areas to be treated individually, and perhaps contrasted. The argument in this paper is a general one, however, which does not deny the specifics of the local contexts.

Most of the material is either unprovenienced or comes from burials, whether within the geographic area assigned to each culture or outside it as “intrusive.” Single and multiple burials appear in several different modalities, the most common of which being urn burial and direct burial (e.g. Baldini and Bafi, 1996; Baldini *et al.*, 2003; Boman, 1908; González, 1972; Rydén, 1936). Burials are either located in and around settlements or occur in small and large cemeteries. Specific elements point toward making bodies, during life and after death. Various forms of cranial deformation had been practiced, including tabula oblique among the skeletal material found in the San Francisco area (e.g. Ortiz, 2003, 43), and tabula erecta in association with Candelaria material (e.g. Rydén, 1936; see Fig. 3). Piercings and

related ornaments, and evidence of body modifications are also found (see Baldini and Baffi, 1996). Bodies were generally buried singly, but not exclusively so. In the San Francisco area urn burial was restricted to infants (although there is limited overall evidence), while in La Candelaria there is limited evidence of differential burial on the basis of age (Baldini *et al.*, 2003). Secondary burial was common, and multiple burials in the same urn were not unusual. The human remains may be complete or partial. In the well preserved site of Las Pirguas, bodies were allowed to mummify naturally and then were disarticulated (Baldini and Baffi, 1996; Baldini *et al.*, 2003; González, 1972). Transformation through fire was clearly significant – burnt materials were often found within and around the urns, with one example of an apparent mass cremation (Baldini and Baffi, 1996, 9).

Associations between plants, animals, sea life, minerals and people are referenced through the remains of food, including various species of maize, vegetable matter, shell material, predominantly in the form of snails shell necklaces, and other intra-specific connections. Camelid coprolite was removed from sealed burial urns at Las Pirguas. In addition, among the Candelarian burials a white chalky substance has been found on the exterior of urns and within burials in the form of cakes. This substance was also used to fill the incisions in ceramic vessels (Baldini and Baffi, 1996). Further work will elucidate more fully the specifics of these connections. It is clearly signaling a concern with the physical body and its relation to other substances and materials, whether of human manufacture or associated with the animal or plant world. Such materials could be evidence for the “actualization” of persons through specific practices of bodily care (Vilaça, 2005).

Stabilizing pots, stabilizing matter

The transformability constitutive of bodies has its counterpart in the forms and treatment of the ceramic assemblages. My point here is that both working on the body and the emergence of a specific ceramic corpus that stresses placticity of form were aimed at intervening in the world, to ensure a minimum of stability in bodily form and therefore a commonality of perspective. I see the ceramic forms as potential additional evidence for this concern.

The La Candelaria and San Francisco material differ in respect to their figural ceramic assemblage. Fantastical pipes with zooanthropomorphic imagery on the pipe bowls are dominant in San Francisco, along with infants urns that include humanoid faces (see Fig. 4). La Candelaria urns are massive, often re-used, and are only very rarely marked with schematic anthropomorphic faces. The fantastic forms that make an appearance in La Candelaria material are types hard to characterize due to their

variability, but include anthropomorphic vessels; globular-humanoid double vessels (Fig. 5); orniform or asymmetrical vessels (Fig. 6); and zoomorphic vessels of varying size. Non-anthropomorphic ceramics that do not include obvious reference to human or animal bodies continue the theme of bulges and odd, asymmetrical shapes (e.g. Fig. 6). These vessels are either in collections for which no provenience is known, or they have come from burial urns. What is clear is that all the forms make reference to extra-human bodies and combinations of bodies. There is no “canon” in the sense that each piece, while clearly generated within the context of pieces like it, seems to play to specific needs and respond to specific concerns. For example, the orniform vessels rework combinations of elements to create individual pieces, no two of which are exactly alike (see Fig. 5).

My argument here is broad scale and straightforward: all the ceramics seem to respond to a general concern with bodies and their transformability and instability. Rather than simply representing this belief – as the imposition of a mental template onto inert matter – they can be usefully thought of as active participants (in the sense of Gell, 1998) in the perspectival oscillations characteristic of a world where one’s point of view must be fought for. To illustrate this point, many anthropomorphic forms show what could be described as “representations” of body modification – their faces and bodies are marked with incised lines reminiscent of tattoos (Fig. 4). San Francisco urns excavated at Arroyo del Medio show clear lip plugs (see Fig. 4). Marking the body of the pot can be seen as equivalent to marking the body of the living, and not a representation of that act. The purpose of marking the human body – to ensure a minimum of stability to a chronically unstable body – was the same reason behind marking the pot: to ensure a minimum of stability for the pot. As such, these are not metaphors. Gell (1998, 199) made a similar point in relation to Marquesan art, which he saw as a technique for enhancing the person. That art, when it occurs on house posts, is not a representation of that principle, but is itself an enactment of it: the house post becomes a means of enhancing the house. Ceramics may have worked in similar ways. One could ask, What was it about the contexts – usually burials – that required this enhancement?

Vilaça (2005) has argued that there are two ways to compensate for the chronic instability of the body: to work at ensuring a minimum of stability with kin through common practices aimed at establishing consubstantiality; and to dominate the others perspective, to gain knowledge and therefore mastery of it deliberately. Traditionally, the presence of such a pot may have been taken as evidence of the shamanic status of the deceased. But, it could also be argued that they were part of a mechanism of controlled transformation of the deceased into another form. Transformation is a capacity common to humanity which must be controlled because transformation can be the result of another being’s will.

In summary, things are vulnerable to change. These forms seem to suggest hybridity, the mixing of humans, animals, and other creatures. Knowledge that what you are looking at is not what it seems comes from recognizing either a physical or behavioral attribute out of the ordinary. However, in the case of these forms I argue that that clue refers to another view on reality, rather than a hybrid being. I'd suggest, then, that the forms are not static representations of a hybrid state, but rather are themselves a movement between states. If one couples with this Viveiros de Castro's (2004, 471) observation that things (or artifacts) are "ontologically ambiguous," then the pots may be existing in two forms for two realities. As such, a straightforward application of the label "hybrid" would not seem to capture adequately their role. Rather, both body techniques and pots were working to ensure the stability of a particular perspective through controlled transformation and making stable matter conceived of as chronically unstable. Bodies, pots, and the other materials with which they were involved were not conceived of as stable end products – objects as such – but rather were relevant in creating stable meanings and some type of constancy out of an unstable world.

ARE POTS STABLE VEHICLES FOR MEANING?

Lazzari (2005) writes that the ceramics "solidify social relations" through their mobility and design, shaping future interaction (Lazzari, 2005, 147). I suspect that thinking of ceramics as necessarily durable, or necessarily fixed forms, may be thinking of the thing – the pot – as a fixed and stable outcome of social exchange or production, rather than a continued presence in such relations. A further consequence of this argument is the assumption that to present something in material form is to give stability to a group of people's beliefs and social relations. There is a general argument that material forms objectify relations. I agree that they can. However, it is easy to slide into a simple equation between material culture and stability or perdurability, especially if one is in love with one's pots. We tend to assume that things etched in stone, or presented in the rigid form of a ceramic pot, refer to ideas that are thus given greater stability. We may assume that artifacts solidify meanings. I think it is a mistake to think about the pot itself as a stable thing, able to project stability due to some inherent aspect of its "materiality". If there is no general, fixed substrate to the physical world, then surely this includes ceramics and the materials from which they are made and become. If there is a general suspicion of form (see Storrie, 2003), then ceramics may have been considered less stable and reliable even than other forms of discourse. The treatment of the ceramics may attest to this. Holes were deliberately knocked out of the bottom of the urns, smaller vessels seem

to have been deliberately and specifically damaged (see Fig. 7); they were also frequently repaired with the use of cord laced through holes drilled in the bodies; some were placed face down and the entire bottom smashed in order to insert the deceased (Baldini and Baffi, 1996). Repairs included the use of sherds from other vessels. In other words, matter was not guaranteed to stay put. Artefacts are of the world; they are evidence of the attempt to stabilize relations rather than meanings. In turn, the stability in relations ensures a minimal stability in perspective and thus the material world.

CONCLUSION: ON LOVING POTS

In conclusion, then, there is an argument to be made that peoples of northwestern Argentina worked to shore up the stability of the world – building islands of sand – rather than taking the matter-of-factness of the world for granted. Furthermore, transformability is constitutive of notions of bodies and not a thing that occurs or is done to a stable, self-evident body that is subsequently transformed. Pots and other materials are not separate, durable things of the world that simply add stability or are tools for transformation, but are part of the fabric of the world. If matter is considered unstable, then so too are pots. Their fantastical forms are specific instances of intervening in the world, not a representation of it. Further analysis will add detail to my argument. For example, it is suggestive that the key axis of difference appears to be the human – non-human. Furthermore, bodies become increasingly “naturalistic” when forms of animals, with no traces of humanity, are presented alone, such as the few examples of camelid-shaped vessels, and the fog or toad appliqués on other vessels¹.

Donna Haraway (2004, 338) has said, “Figures are never innocent. The relationship of a subject to a figure is best described as a cathexis of some kind...” The implications of this bond need to be “excavated”. A similar warning could be heeded by archaeologists. The dominant visual presentation of archaeological material – as isolated finds, pot profiles, gorgeous site plans – discourages us from seeing differences. The task is to disassemble traditional “wholes” (objects) and reassemble our materials into contingent forms, recognizing that pots and people are simply part of the same process of world formation and dissolution (see Ingold, 2006). Although, in our efforts to think beyond nature/culture and the modern invention of material culture we could ask, to what is our new commitment?

¹ I am grateful to Andrés Laguens for pointing this out.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Vítor Oliveira Jorge and Julian Thomas for including me in their session, and for their tireless efforts in organizing the TAG session and then this publication. I have benefited from the work and advice of experts in Northwest Argentinean archaeology, especially Cristina Scattolin, Joan Gero, and Andrés Laguens. Needless to say, I do not expect them to agree with my interpretations. Researchers at the Museo de Antropología in Córdoba, Argentina, were incredibly generous with their time and expertise, above all Mirta Bonnin, Andrés Laguens, and Andrés Izeta. I am grateful to the Museum for permission to publish photographs of their collections. María Gutierrez at the Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires established important contacts in Argentina, and Neil Conrad at Framingham State College Library procured the impossible for me through inter-library loan. Research for this paper was partially funded by a research monies received from Framingham State College. Finally, this paper could not have been written without Karen Alberti.

REFERENCES

- AMBROSETTI, J. B. (1906). *Exploraciones Arqueológicas en La Pampa Grande*, Buenos Aires, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Publicaciones de la Sección Antropológica.
- BALDINI, M., BAFFI, E., SALABERRY, M. & TORRES, M. (2003) Candelaria: Una aproximación desde un conjunto de sitios localizados entre los cerros de Las Pirguas y el Alto del Rodeo (Dto. Guachipas, Salta, Argentina), *La mitad verde del mundo Andino. Investigaciones arqueológicas en la vertiente oriental de los Andes y las tierras bajas de Bolivia y Argentina* (eds G. Ortiz and B. Ventura), Jujuy, Universidad Nacional de Jujuy, pp. 131-51.
- BALDINI, M. & BAFFI, E. (1996). Comportamiento mortuario en la población prehispánica de Las Pirguas (Pampa Grande, Salta), *Revista del Museo de Historia Natural de San Rafael*, vol. 23, nos 1-4, pp. 7-16.
- BECKER-DONNER, E. (1952). Die nordwestargentinischen Sammlungen des Wiener Museums für Völkerkunde. II, *Archiv für Völkerkunde*, vols 6-7, pp. 229-362.
- BECKER-DONNER, E. (1953). Nichtkeramische Kulturfunde Nordwestargentinens. Aus den Sammlungen des Wiener Museums für Völkerkunde, *Archiv für Völkerkunde*, vol. 8, pp. 273-324.
- BERBERIAN, E. & NIELSON, A. (eds) (2001). *Historia Argentina Prehispánica, Tomo I*, Córdoba, Editorial Brujas.
- BERON, M. (2006). Relaciones interétnicas e identidad social en el registro arqueológico, *Género y etnicidad en la arqueología Suramericana: Actas de la Segunda Reunión Internacional de Teoría Arqueológica en América del Sur* (eds V. Williams and B. Alberti), Tandil, Argentina (Serie Teórica No.4, Ediciones INCUAPA), pp. 119-38.
- BOMAN, E. (1908). *Antiquités de la région andine de la République Argentine et du désert d'Atacama*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale.
- CONKLIN, B. (2001). *Consuming grief: Compassionate cannibalism in an Amazonian society*, Austin, University of Texas Press.
- GELL, A. (2006). *Art and agency*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- GONZALEZ, A. R. (1972). Descubrimientos arqueológicos en la Serranía de Las Pirguas, Pcia. de Salta, *Revista de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata*, vol. 24, pp. 388-92.

- GONZALEZ, A. R. (1977). *Arte Precolombino de la Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Filmediciones Valero.
- GORETTI, M. (ed.) (2006) *Tesoros Precolombinos del Noroeste Argentino*, Buenos Aires, Fundación CEPPA Ediciones.
- HARAWAY, D. (2004). *The Haraway Reader*, New York, Routledge.
- HEREDIA, O. (1968). Arqueología de la subarea de las selvas occidentales, *Actas y Memorias del XXXVII Congreso Internacional de Americanistas*, vol. 2, pp. 295-353.
- HEREDIA, O. (1975). Investigaciones arqueológicas en el sector meridional de las selvas occidentales, *Revista del Instituto de Antropología, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba*, vol. 5, pp. 73-118.
- INGOLD, T. (2006). Materials against materiality, unpublished manuscript.
- JONES, A. (2001). Drawn from memory: the archaeology of aesthetics and the aesthetics of archaeology in Earlier Bronze Age Britain and the present, *World Archaeology*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 335-356.
- LAGUENS, A. & GASTALDI, M. (2005). Registro material, fisicalidad, interioridad, continuidad y discontinuidad: Posiciones y oposiciones frente a la naturaleza y las cosas, paper presented at the 1er Taller de Arqueología Teórica de Chile, November 2005.
- LAZZARI, M. (2005). The textura of things: Objects, people, and landscape in Northwest Argentina (First Millenium A.D.), *Archaeologies of materiality* (ed. L. Meskell), Malden, MA, Blackwell, pp. 126-61.
- MUÑOZ, A. (1999). La Colección Rydén del Museo Etnográfico de Gotenborg, Un aporte a la discusión de la Cultura Candelaria. *Libro de Resúmenes del XIII Congreso Nacional de Antropología Argentina, Córdoba*, Córdoba, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, p. 263.
- NORDENSKIOLD, E. [1903] (1993). *Lugares precolombinos de asentamiento y entierro en la frontera sudoeste del Chaco*, Jujuy, Universidad Nacional de Jujuy.
- ORTIZ, G. (2003). Estado actual del conocimiento del denominado complejo o tradición cultural San Francisco, a 100 años de su descubrimiento, *La mitad verde del mundo Andino. Investigaciones arqueológicas en la vertiente oriental de los Andes y las tierras bajas de Bolivia y Argentina* (eds G. Ortiz and B. Ventura), Jujuy, Universidad Nacional de Jujuy, pp. 23-71.
- ORTIZ, G. & VENTURA, B. (eds) (2003). *La mitad verde del mundo Andino. Investigaciones arqueológicas en la vertiente oriental de los Andes y las tierras bajas de Bolivia y Argentina*, Jujuy, Universidad Nacional de Jujuy.
- RYDEN, S. (1936). *Archaeological researches in the Department of La Candelaria (Prov. Salta, Argentina)*, Goteborg, Etnografiska Museet i Göteborg (Ethnological Studies 3).
- SCATTOLIN, C. (2003). Los ancestros de Calchaquí: una visión de la colección Zavaleta, *Cuadernos*, vol. 20, pp. 51-79.
- SCATTOLIN, C. (2004). Categorías indígenas y clasificaciones arqueológicas en el Noroeste Argentino, *Hacia una arqueología de las arqueologías Sudamericanas* (ed. A. Haber), Bogotá, Universidad de los Andes, pp. 53-82.
- SCATTOLIN, C. & LAZZARI, M. (1998). Tramando redes: obsidiano al oeste del Aconquija, *Estudios Atacameños*, vol. 14, pp. 189-209.
- SERRANO, A. (1962). *Investigaciones arqueológicas en el Valle del Río San Francisco (Provincia de Jujuy)*, Salta, Argentina.
- STENBORG, P. (1999). An introduction to the archaeology of North-western Argentina, *Masked Histories: A re-examination of the Rodolfo Schreiter Collection from North-western Argentina* (eds P. Stenborg and A. Muñoz), Göteborg, Etnografiska Museet i Göteborg (Ethnological

- Studies 43), pp. 21-44.
- STENBORG, P. & MUNOZ, A. (eds) (1999). *Masked Histories: A re-examination of the Rodolfo Schreiter Collection from North-western Argentina*, Göteborg, Etnografiska Museet i Göteborg (Ethnological Studies 43).
- STORRIE, R. (2003). Equivalence, personhood and relationality: processes of relatedness among the Hoti of Venezuelan Guiana, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 407-28.
- TARRAGO, M. (ed.) (2000). *Nueva historia Argentina: Los pueblos originarios y la conquista*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana.
- VENTURA, B. & ORTIZ, G. (2003). Presentación, *La mitad verde del mundo Andino. Investigaciones arqueológicas en la vertiente oriental de los Andes y las tierras bajas de Bolivia y Argentina* (eds G. Ortiz and B. Ventura), Jujuy, Universidad Nacional de Jujuy, pp. 7-22.
- VILAÇA, A. (2005). Chronically unstable bodies: Reflections on amazonian corporalities, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 445-64.
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, E. (1992). *From the enemy's point of view: Humanity and divinity in an Amazonian society*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, E. (1998). Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 469-88.
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, E. (2004). Exchanging perspectives: The transformation of objects into subjects in Amerindian ontologies, *Common Knowledge*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 463-84.
- WILLIAMS, V. (2006). Unidades étnicas. Discusión sobre un acercamiento arqueológico, *Género y etnicidad en la arqueología Suramericana: Actas de la Segunda Reunión Internacional de Teoría Arqueológica en América del Sur* (eds V. Williams and B. Alberti), Tandil, Argentina (Serie Teórica No. 4, Ediciones INCUAPA), pp. 163-180.



Fig. 1 – Santa María urn in the Salta Museum (approx. height 80cm). Photo: author.

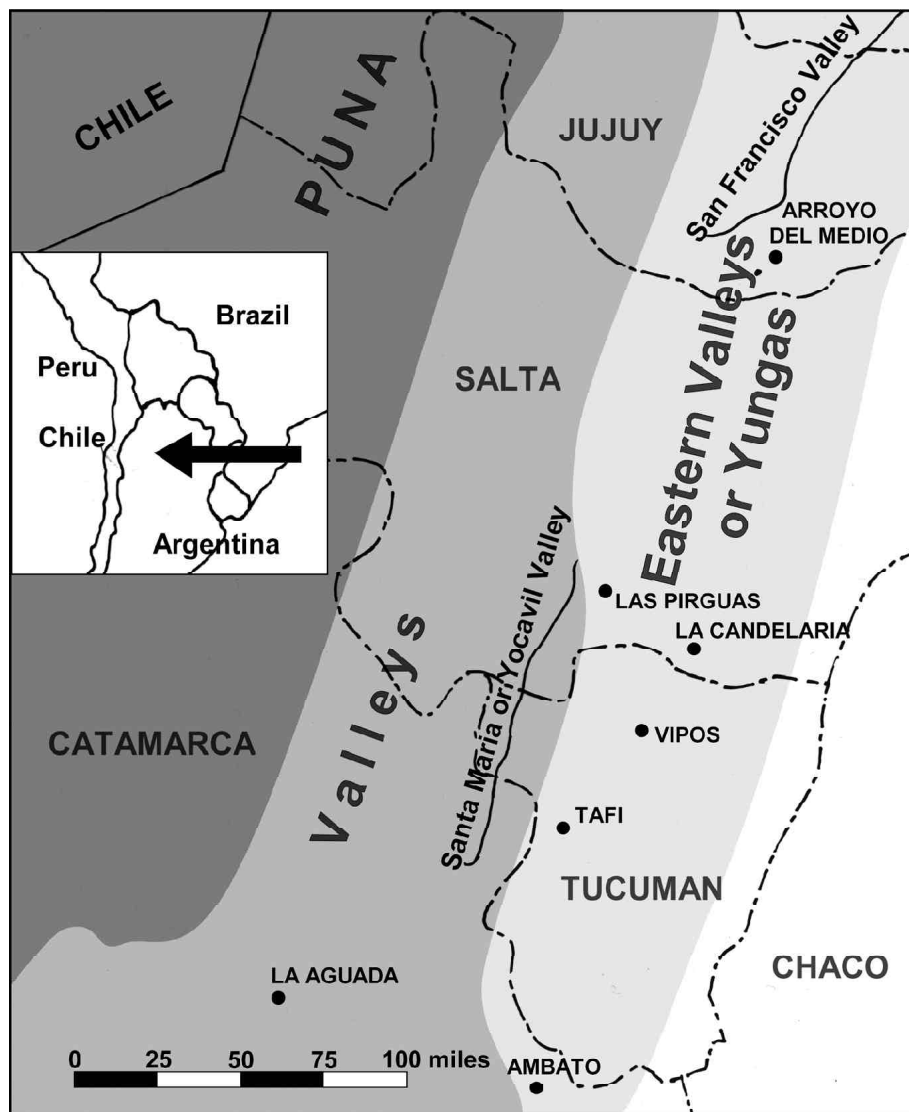


Fig. 2 – Map of northwest Argentina, showing locations mentioned in the text.

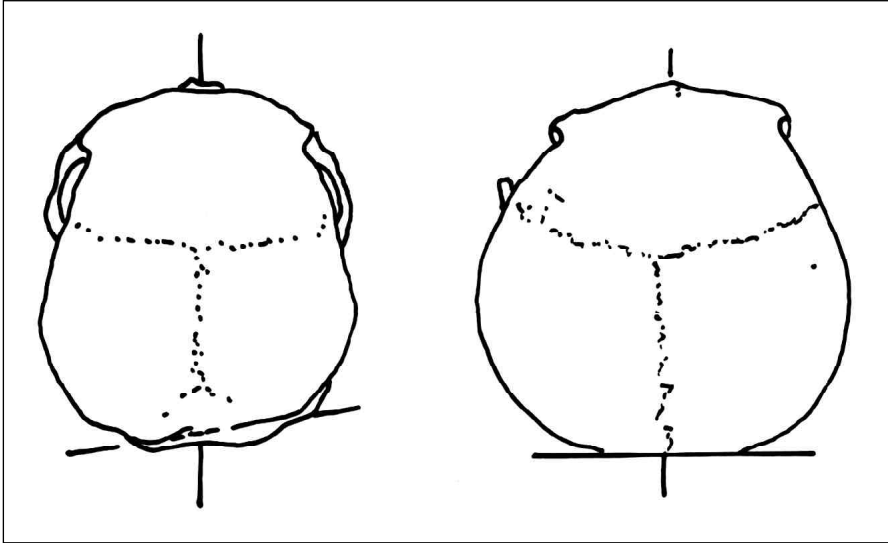


Fig. 3 – Tabula erecta cranial modification, La Candelaria (maximum breadth 14.1cm and 15.1cm). Re-drawn from Rydén 1936, Figs 144 and 147.

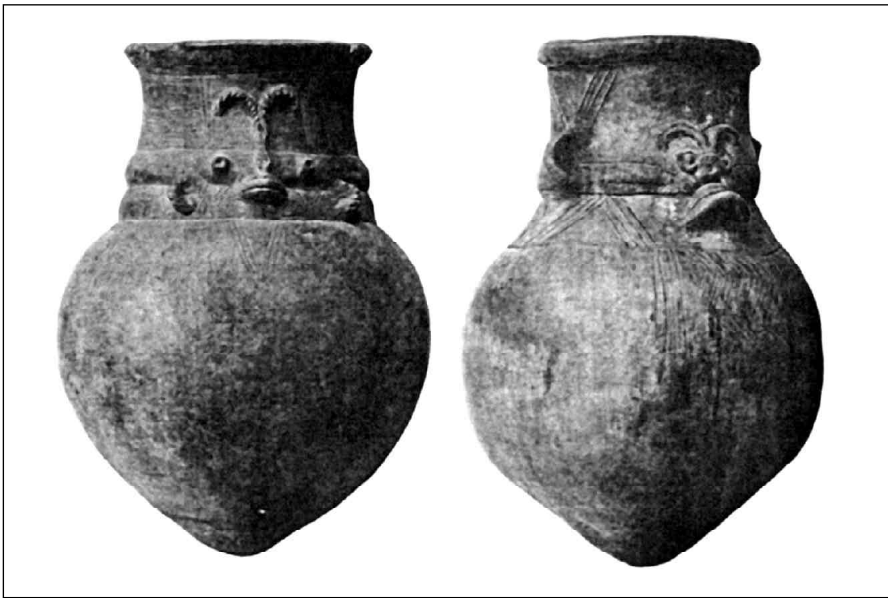


Fig. 4 – San Francisco funerary urns, Arroyo del Medio, Jujuy (heights 43cm and 44cm). After Boman 1908, Plate 83.

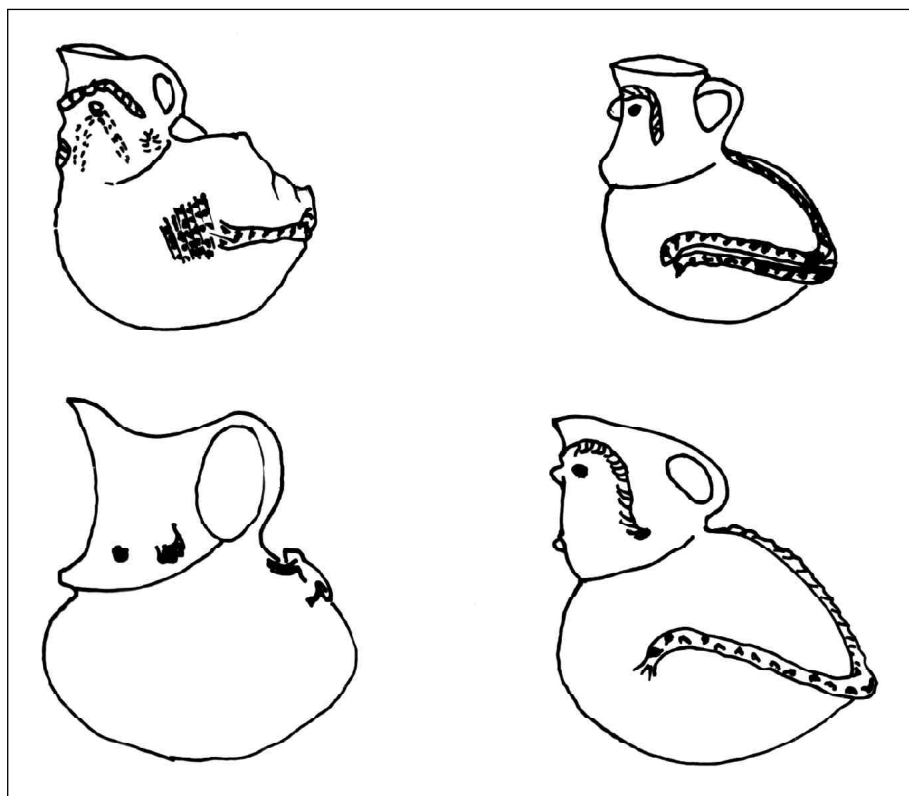


Fig. 5 – Orniform vessels, La Candelaria (approx. heights 15-20cm).
Re-drawn from Heredia 1974, Fig. 6.

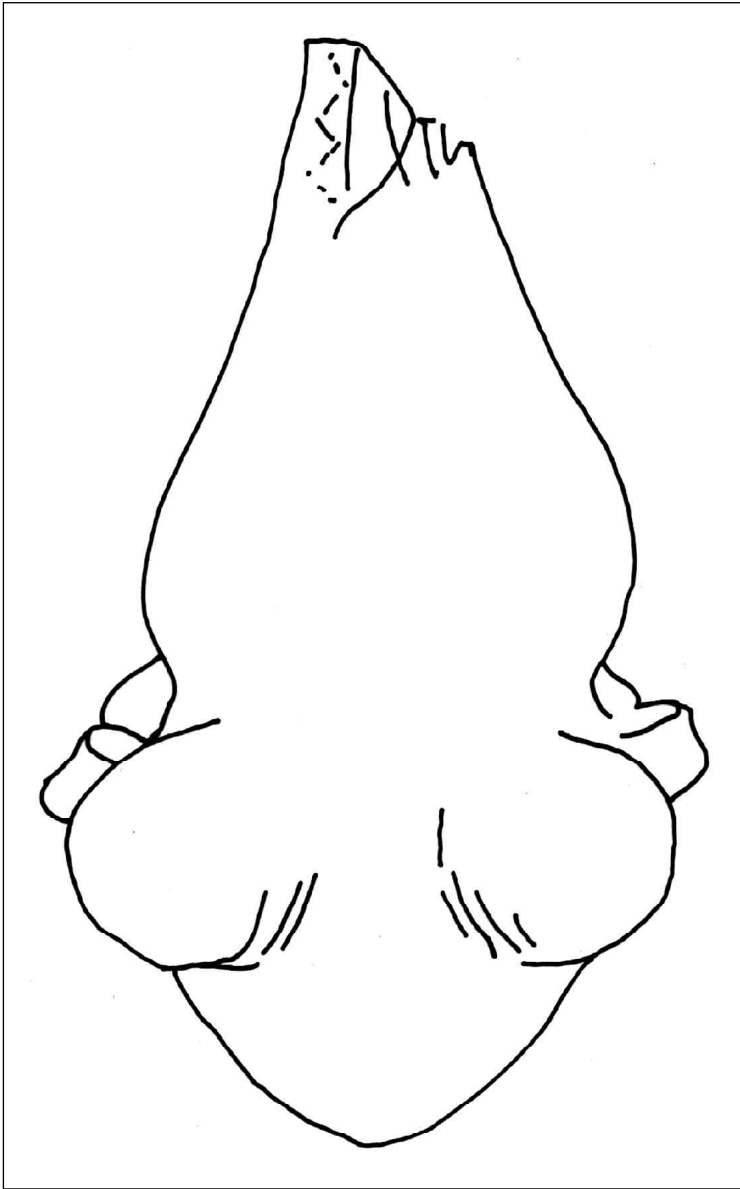


Fig. 6 – Vessel with globular protrusions. Several have been found with clearly modeled and incised anthropomorphized necks and faces (approx. height 40cm). Re-drawn from Rydén 1936, Fig. 81b.



Fig. 7 – Apparently deliberately destroyed orniform double-vessel with applied anthropomorphic limbs, collected at Rio Vipos, Tucuman. Anthropology Museum, Córdoba. Photo: author, reproduced with kind permission.