

# Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God and the Iconography of Liquids

## A Bone Tube at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin

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**Abstract.** A bone tube of the Tiwanaku culture in the South American collections of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin is one of the rarest of its kind. This article analyzes its iconography and explores the relationship between the graphic message and the object's original function. I argue that the depiction on the tube represents not only the commonly known character called the Sacrificer or Upturned-Nose Decapitator but also the Tiwanaku counterpart of the Moche Snake-belt God, who participates in such a wide range of activities that he appears to play a central role in a major epic story. Despite his role in themes connected to decapitation and primordial places, he is a character associated with the iconography of liquids. I will define the graphic repertory of liquids and raise the question how it fits with the fact that the bone tube originally contained fine-grained cinnabar.

[Tiwanaku, cosmology, communication, depiction of liquids, cinnabar, South American collection of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin]

### Introduction

To date, very little information exists on bone containers in the Central Andes, and even less about those containing cinnabar. A bone tube in the South American collections of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (EMB) apparently once served such a function. Although the original content of the bone tube is known, it is difficult to reconstruct the context in which it was used due to the lack of comparable objects with contextual information. This paper tries to approximate the bone tube's original function. At a first step, the meaning of the figurative iconography is examined. To determine on what occasions the bone tube and its contents were used, the analysis seeks to go beyond iconographic interpretation. In a second step, relationship between the depiction and the contents, suggesting that the full meaning of the object results from the interaction of both dimensions. This study is based on a research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).<sup>1</sup>

### Description of the Bone Tube

Walter Lehmann, a German scholar known for his documentation of many indigenous cultures and languages of Central America, bought the bone tube, V A 63341 (Fig. 1 a, b) from the Bolivian collector Díez de Medina in 1931. The bone tube is approximately 5.8 cm in height and decorated with fine carvings. Many parts of the engraving were originally inlaid with turquoise and red seashell (*Spondylus princeps*). Some inlays on the nose, eye, nail, headdress, feather collar and leg are still visible. Only one half of the tube is preserved. The inside shows remnants of a fine cinnabar powder, whose color intensity still fascinates the observer. The archaeological site of Tiwanaku is noted as the provenance, which is likely because Max Uhle collected an iconographically similar object at Tiwanaku in 1898—although the latter showed no traces of cinnabar.

The engraving shows a protagonist known as either the Sacrificer (Valcárcel 1958: 563), the Long-Nose Anthropomorphic Sacrificer (Torres 2017) or the Upturned-Nose Decapitator (Young-Sanchez 2004). He is depicted with a Pinocchio-like upturned nose, inlaid with green turquoise and in a running position. The face is shown upward-facing posi-

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**Fig. 1 a, b** Bone tube V A 63341 at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (a), engraved outside and cinnabar on the inner wall of the container (b), depiction encircling the bone tube, photograph: Christiane Clados.

tion, similar to the Winged Profile Attendants with avian and human faces on the famous Gate of the Sun at the archaeological site of Tiwanaku. Attendants like the Upturned-Nose Decapitator are often associated with deities shown in frontal view, so-called staff gods (Isbell and Knobloch 2006, and many more), but in the case of the bone tube the protagonist appears to be looking at an “imaginary” staff god. The upper half of a stepped platform can be recognized below his legs, a motif commonly identified as a mountain (Smith 2012). The Upturned-Nose Decapitator is wearing a collar inlaid with turquoise and a crownband with appendages ending in various motifs. The base of the crownband consists of a serpent body with an upward-looking feline head and the “tail feather” design (Menzel 1964). The central appendages end in a ring and another tail feather design.<sup>2</sup> In one hand, Upturned-Nose Decapitator is carrying an axe; in the other, a serpent-shaped staff with tail feathers at the top and a severed head suspended from the lower end (Baitzel and Trigo 2019: 43). Another serpent-shaped appendage ending in tail feathers emerges from his mouth. Its identification is difficult, but it is probably what it most resembles: a serpent-shaped tongue ending in feathers. Once again, the body of a serpent functions as a visual metaphor for an elongated element as is the case for the crownband, staff and belt. Such visual metaphors were called *kenning* by John H. Rowe (1967) in his pioneering article on Chavín iconography.

Severed heads relate the scene of the bone tube to activities such as warfare or the ritual decapitation of sacrificial prisoners. This observation is confirmed by engraved depictions on wooden snuff trays from San Pedro de Atacama (Fig. 2 a, b) which are iconographically related to the bone tube at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. A snuff tray from Quitor 6, Tomb 3613 (Torres and Conklin 1995: 97, Fig. 16 a) shows the Upturned-Nose Decapitator with a serpent-shaped staff next to which a skull (characterized by its tripartite division) can be seen. Skulls are a common motif in Tiwanaku imagery and can be best identified on finely carved stone sculptures such as on the skirts of the monumen-

<sup>2</sup> Stylistically, the crownband is an archaism as it imitates iconographic conventions of the earlier Pucara culture.

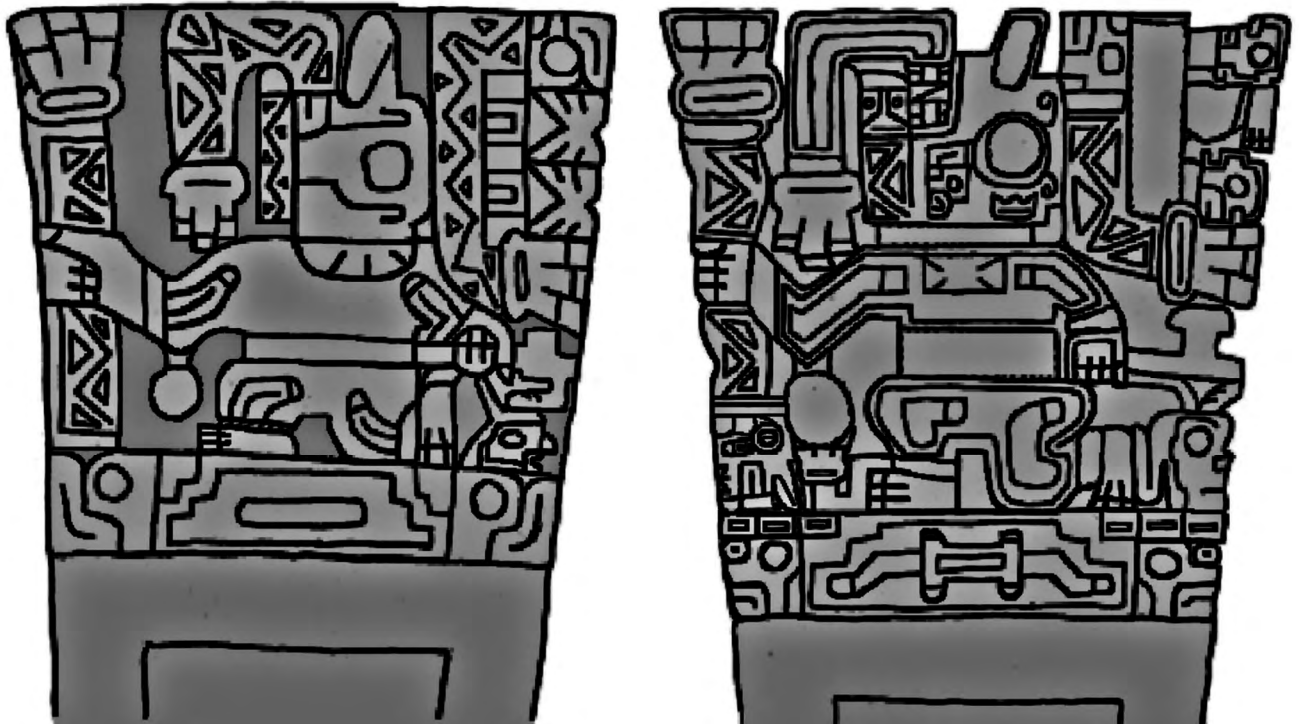


Fig. 2 a, b 'Battle' theme. Upturned-Nose Decapitator or Tiwanaku Snake-belt God on snuff trays, San Pedro de Atacama, drawings: Christiane Clados after Torres and Conklin 1995: 97, Fig. 16 c, Torres 2019: Figs. 11.33 b, d.

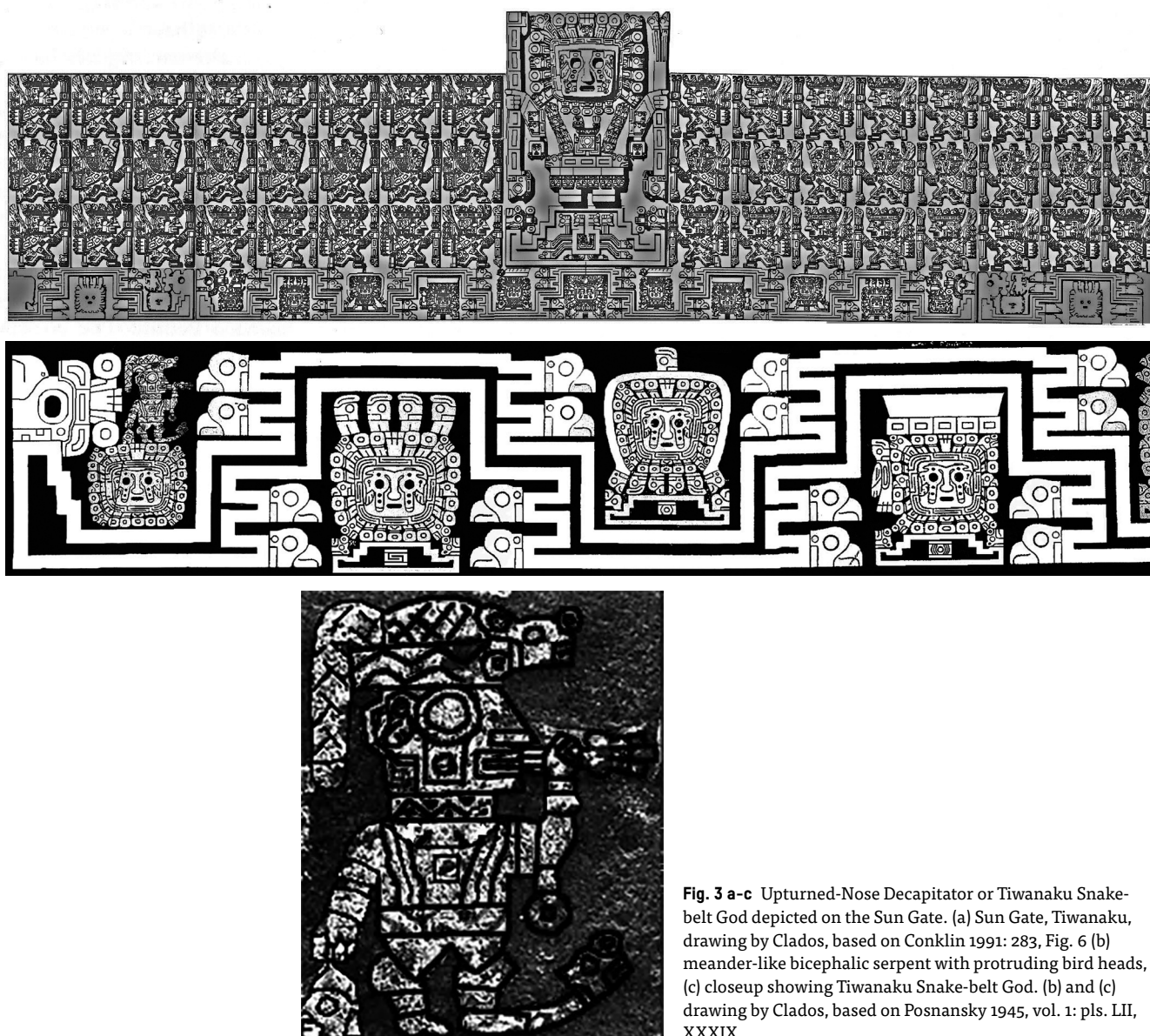
tal statue of the Ponce Monolith and the miniature ancestor figure at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Young-Sanchez 2004: 35, Fig. 2.14). In some cases skulls are a part of headdresses, for example in the case of a bone object at the Cleveland Art Museum (Young-Sanchez 2004: 109, Fig. 4.12 a, b). All examples show the Upturned-Nose Decapitator in profile view indicating that he is of lesser rank than staff deities in frontal view (Fig. 1 a, b and 2 a, b). Because of his prominent nose, he is sometimes confused with the anthropomorphic Llama Sacrificer (Baitzel and Trigo 2019) who differs from him by the long upright standing ears. Originally, the tube's surface showed the same motif twice.

## Appearance in other Themes

The engraving on the bone tube and the related depictions on snuff trays from San Pedro de Atacama show the Upturned-Nose Decapitator as a central protagonist in a theme connected to warfare or human sacrifice. But there are other themes<sup>3</sup> in which he appears. One of them can be seen on the often-discussed Sun Gate at the Tiwanaku site (Fig. 3 a), in which, although small in size, he is one of the most crucial protagonists (Fig. 3 c). In the lower band of the frieze he is again depicted with a serpent-shaped tongue that ends in tail feathers, and carrying a decapitated human head. But unlike the bone tube he is grasping his tongue with the other hand to make it look as if he is playing a trumpet (Fig. 3 b).<sup>4</sup> Depicted in this way, he is integrated in a much larger scene including many other protagonists such as a large meander-shaped bicephalic serpent, which consists of a serpent body ending in two bird heads. Rayed faces on mountain signs (Smith 2012) are placed between the serpent body (Fig. 3 b). As we will see, the undulating bicephalic serpent is a common representational convention for liquid.

<sup>3</sup> For a in-depth definition of *themes* as a descriptive category in Tiwanaku iconography, see Viau-Corville 2014. For the representation of space in Tiwanaku iconography as an indicator of scenes, see Clados 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See Posnansky (1945, I: 149), who calls this personage "Bugle Player".



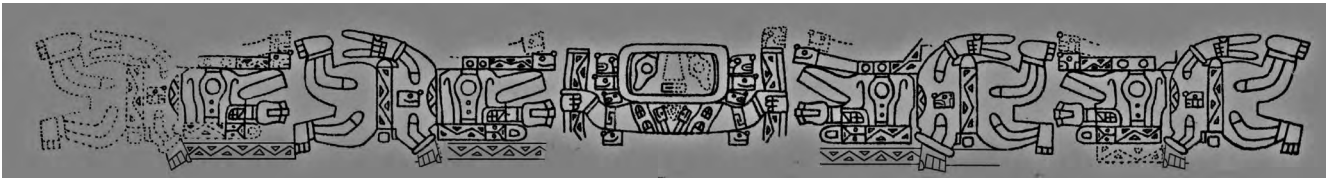
**Fig. 3 a-c** Upturned-Nose Decapitator or Tiwanaku Snake-belt God depicted on the Sun Gate. (a) Sun Gate, Tiwanaku, drawing by Clados, based on Conklin 1991: 283, Fig. 6 (b) meander-like bicephalic serpent with protruding bird heads, (c) closeup showing Tiwanaku Snake-belt God. (b) and (c) drawing by Clados, based on Posnansky 1945, vol. 1: pls. LII, XXXIX.

There are two other major themes in which the Upturned-Nose Decapitator plays a central role. In some depictions he seems to be involved in conflicts with high-ranking supernatural beings. For example, on the Linares lintel (Posnansky 1945: Fig. 140 a) (Fig. 4 a,b) he appears taking a “floating” pose, facing a frontal staff deity, again with well recognizable serpent-shaped tongue ending in a tail feather design.<sup>5</sup> Gestures and pose indicate a dramatic event. Instead of “floating”, the pose can be interpreted in a very different way. As in the case of many warrior depictions in Nasca vase paintings, this pose more likely expresses a ‘falling forward’ and thus indicates a battle situation (Clados 2001). It can be concluded that the frontal staff deity to which the Upturned-Nose Decapitator is turned is an opponent, even though the static posture of the frontal staff god might not make us think so. Another element suggests a scene of combat. Both arms of the Upturned-Nose Decapitator are shown holding weapons—one of them a staff made from a snake’s body, indicated by a zigzag line and triangles.

Another thematic complex, in which the Upturned-Nose Decapitator frequently appears, is related to the presentation of offerings. On an Early Tiwanaku tapestry tunic

<sup>5</sup> Also see the Kantatayita lintel.





**Fig. 4** Linares lintel, drawing of the engraving showing the Upturned-Nose Decapitator “floating” pose, facing a frontal staff deity. Posnansky 1945: Fig. 140 a, b.



**Fig. 5** Tiwanaku Snake-belt God with the gesture of offering, drawing: Clados after Young-Sanchez 2004: 46–49, Fig. 2.26a.

from a private collection (Young-Sanchez 2004: 46–49, Fig. 2.26 a) (Fig. 5), he appears offering a small composite worm or snail while walking towards a building with bird-headed appendages extending from each side. Below the building, a rectangular enclosure appears which is formed by a two-headed serpent whose feline heads flank the entrance. Within the enclosure, which probably represents a ceremonial court,<sup>6</sup> a large frontal staff deity stands whose paraphernalia is related to birds, composite serpents and plants. It is likely that the Upturned-Nose Decapitator is making offerings to a frontal staff deity.

## Upturned-Nose Decapitator, a Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God

With the characteristic features and activities described above, the Upturned-Nose Decapitator seems to be a typical supernatural being of the Tiwanaku culture and the adjacent Wari culture. However, a look outside this region shows that there are depictions showing comparable beings, especially on the north coast of Peru (Bernier and Chapdelaine 2018: 573–596).

Anatomy and dress of the Upturned-Nose Decapitator clearly resemble those of a well-known anthropomorphic being of the Moche culture, referred to by different scholars as the Snake-Belt God (Benson 2012: 61–72), Ai-Apaec<sup>7</sup> (Larco Hoyle 1939), Quismique (Golte 1994), God F (Lieske 1991: 45), and Wrinkle Face (Donnan and McClland 1979). The Snake-Belt God is considered to be a primarily southern Moche deity (Benson 2012: 61). He is shown with a fanged mouth wearing a feline-headed snaky belt and a feline-headed headdress with paws, as well as a feather fan. He appears to be a major protagonist in various activities. Many monsters such as the Crested Animal, Strombus Monster and Split Crest (Benson 2012: 63) are depicted fighting him.

<sup>6</sup> The enclosure is the geometrized Tiwanaku version of a motif that has its origin in the earlier Pucara iconography. The same motif can be identified on a Pucara or Early Tiwanaku ornamented gold plume dating to around AD 400 (Young-Sanchez 2004: 94–95).

<sup>7</sup> Henry Luis Gayoso-Rullier (2014) demonstrates that Ai-Apaec (Aiapaec) is a name that has positioned itself in the academic and tourism field. According to him Ai-Apæc (maker) is not the proper name of a god.

A comparison of both beings shows that the Upturned-Nose Decapitator shares many characteristics with the Snake-belt God of the Moche, even if this is not immediately visible due to the use of different styles. Like the Snake-Belt God of the North Coast, he is an anthropomorphic being wearing a snake-belt and a feline-headed headdress. As the central protagonist in a longer narrative, which includes divine battles, he seems to be the Moche counterpart, a Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God. This assumption is supported by several representations dating to the transition of the Early Intermediate to the Middle Horizon (ca. 850–1000 AD), which depict the Upturned-Nose Decapitator merging with the Snake-Belt God. For example, a textile glove at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, shows the Snake-Belt God depicted in a typical Moche style carrying Moche weapons—hand axe, shield and spears—but with the Upturned-Nose Decapitator's prominent nose (Lavalle and Lang 1977: 238). Also, the halved eyes of some of the jaguars indicate a strong Tiwanaku-Wari influence.

## A Culture Hero?

With the obvious resemblance to the Snake-Belt God of the Moche culture, what can be said about the Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God's nature? Both Snake-Belt Gods are involved in episodes of conflict, a feature that points to the identification as a culture hero according to Max Lüthi (1976). This is at least the interpretation for the Snake-Belt God of the Moche culture. In their works on the narrative nature of Moche fineline paintings, Bärbel Lieske (1991: 45) and Elizabeth Benson (2012: 67) refer to the Snake-Belt God as a culture hero, because he is the main protagonist in the cycle of a series of divine battles. Still in later periods culture heroes played an important role in the Central Andes, especially in Inca origin myths. For example, the Huarochirí Manuscript (ca. 1608) (Salomon and Urioste 1991) dated to shortly after the European Invasion, confirms the existence of a culture hero called Paria Caca, a supernatural being (*huaca*) who fought humans like the Yuncas and other *huacas* like Mana Ñamca, and established his own cult. The Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God may have performed similarly.

## Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God and the Graphic Repertory of Liquids

There is another very distinguishing feature of the Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God that has not been mentioned so far. Various themes show him in connection with different types and qualities of liquids. Liquids are frequently shown in Tiwanaku graphic repertory, but have never been recognized as such. They appear as variations of continuous volute motifs (Goldstein 2017: 287), meandering motifs and undulating or zigzagging bands from which animal and human heads, skulls, rings and stepped volutes emerge (Fig. 6 a). This basic pattern is very similar to comparable representations of liquids in the Central Andes, such as the representation of water in the styles of Moche IV and Sicán of the North Coast, without meaning to imply that all representations of liquids in the Central Andes look the same. It is not the form alone that makes the identification of undulating bands and volutes as liquids likely. Rather, it is the fact that they appear very frequently on vessels for beverages. These include, in particular, drinking vessels associated with consumption, commensalist ceremonies (Korpisaari and Pärsinnen 2011) and libation such as drinking goblets (*kerus*), bowls (*tinkerus*), bottles and other vessels (Villanueva and Korpisaari 2013), all serving as containers for liquids. Some *kerus* and bottles at the Ethnologisches Museum are decorated with up to four variations of horizontal undulating bands. Storage and serving vessels like V A 30837, V A 64444 and V A 64575 (Fig. 6 a–c) (Eisleb 1980) show meandering motifs, which encircle the vessel's body and create a



**Fig. 6 a–c** Storage and serving vessels for liquids (*huakolla*), V A 30837, V A 64444, and V A 64575, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, show meandering motifs standing for liquid. The volutes are similar to those of the Sun Gate. V A 64575 (right) shows volutes ending in skulls, photographs: Ines Seibt.

wave-like motif that probably refers to the liquid that was kept in the vessel. Bird and human heads, skulls, legs and wings attached to the basic pattern of the undulating band seem to refer to different (super)natural properties of the bottled liquid. They form a semantic field, i.e. a set of representations grouped by meaning and referring to the specific liquid contained in the vessel. Visual coding of the different qualities of the container's liquid seems to be performed analogous to a language structure. Against that background, it is interesting to consider that Aymara and Quechua are agglutinating languages which have different terms to describe different properties of water by adding affixes to a word root. On the graphic level, these affixes have their equivalent in the human and animal body parts added to the basic motif of the undulating band.

The lower part of the Sun Gate relief can be considered as the best example for depicting the Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God in association with liquid (Fig. 3 c). In this special case, the liquid is represented by an undulating body of a bicephalic serpent (Fig. 3 b), the “root” of the liquid motif, enriched by affixed bird heads, which apart from qualifying the liquid's nature also express its movement. Since the original coloring is not preserved, from which further information could be obtained, it is not clear what kind of liquid is represented. However, the bicephalic serpent's association with rayed faces, which might be (severed) heads of frontal staff deities, and the presence of the Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God carrying a severed head, suggests it is a generative/vital liquid like water or blood.

The Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God's association to liquid is not only evident on preserved stone sculptures and textiles<sup>8</sup> but also on engravings like the ones on snuff trays from Socor, San Pedro de Atacama. Here a third motif related to liquid is used, one that consists of a band ending in a semicircle which can be identified as stream-and-drop motif (Fig. 2 b). As in the case of the undulating band, this motif is part of a semantic field, meaning it stands for some liquid, but gets a more concrete meaning when other elements are added. Appearing in the faces of figures such as staff deities or the Tiwanaku Snake-Belt God of the Linares and Katatayita lintels, the stream-and-drop motif is commonly identified as a tear (Isbell and Knobloch 2006 and many more). However, the same motif appearing inside of arms and legs points rather to a body liquid (Fig. 4). In the case of the snuff trays from Socor, the stream-and-drop motif appears emerging from a rectangular

<sup>8</sup> The stream-and-drop motif is found on various textiles (see Young-Sanchez 2004: 19, Fig. 1.9, 47, Fig. 2) and reliefs like the one of the Bennett and Chunchukala stelae and the Lloreta stone. It goes back to reliefs of the Pucara culture (200 BC), where it can be clearly interpreted as water, as the streams are intertwined with the representation of toads. In combination with the “S motif”, a segment of an undulating band standing for liquid, the stream-and-drop motif even creates visual redundancy (Clados, Goletz, Halbmayer 2022).

or oval element which is embedded in the mountain sign (Smith 2012) (Fig. 2 b). The meaning of this motif combination is not quite clear, but motifs embedded in the mountain sign commonly depict primordial origin places of local ethnic groups (Quechua: *pac-cariscas*) (Bovisio 2019: 244; Clados 2019), where tribal ancestors were believed to have emerged into the world; according to the Quechua chronicler Guaman Poma De Ayala (1990 [1615]), these could have been caves, hills, but also lakes or springs (*paqarinas*). As the stream-and-drop motif points to the association with liquid, an identification of a lake or spring is plausible.

## The Iconography – Content Relation. Labeling a Multiverse

Considering the sophisticated iconography on the bone tube's surface, what can be said about the original function of the object? One important indicator is the size of the object itself. According to H. Wobst (1977), depictions as part of a certain style have the task of sending messages of social, political and economic group affiliation that are known and recognized by the person displaying the message and by the person intended to receive it. The message should be visually apparent and capable of being decoded by their audience. In the case of the Tiwanaku bone tube at the Ethnologisches Museum, the size of the object indicates that the message can only be received by someone standing at a short distance. This suggests its use in the context of an event with a small audience, for which the small-scale message was visually apparent. Eventually, it was even meant to be seen only by the owner himself or herself. The low degree of visibility suggests a very private character of the object. This, and the cinnabar powder it contains, could suggest an original function as a paint container. This is not so improbable, as the use of powdered cinnabar as a cosmetic for Inca noble women (Brown 2001: 470) and as a body paint for corpses (Shimada and Griffin 2005: 83) is well documented.

Another indicator is provided by the iconography-content relation. As can be seen with Tiwanaku vessels containing liquids, the iconography seems to refer to the content and in doing so functions as a kind of labeling system. According to several authors, labeling can be described as disseminating information about a particular product (Forceville 2020: 150). The sender of a message tries to use the most efficient way to get across certain information to a certain addressee/target audience in a certain situation at a certain time and in a certain place (Forceville 2020: 34). But in contrast to Western labels, Tiwanaku artists considered everything with regard to the content as relevant for depiction including the supernatural aspects of the contents. Not only the material properties of the content count, but its origin in primordial times or the meaning it had for supernatural beings are also the subject of representation. The surface of the vessel thus becomes a place where content is shown in its relation to many levels of existence: a multiverse (Halbmayer 2010, vol. I: 193–195) is represented.

Taking this into account, we have to ask in what way the cinnabar powder is related to the representation of the Tiwanaku Snake-belt God. The linking factor is the red color, which characterizes both cinnabar and red liquid or blood, a vital substance closely connected to the fighting activities of the Tiwanaku Snake-belt God. The red color of cinnabar becomes a mental trigger to recall the deeds of a culture hero and dynasty founder to which the owner of the bone tube had some connection. Red liquid, be it red-colored or real blood, and its mental correlate cinnabar, stand for vital substances in association with fighting activities, and also for the generative power inherent in them. Both are a condensed materialization of the cycle of death and life.

In sum, these observations underline the role of Framed Graphic Units and associated pigments not only as visual cues but also as catalysts for cultural memory. Their semantic layering illustrates how visual and material elements interweave to communicate status,



cosmological beliefs, and ancestral affiliations. Future studies might further explore how such combinations of image and substance contributed to strategies of social distinction and legitimation in the Tiwanaku sphere.

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