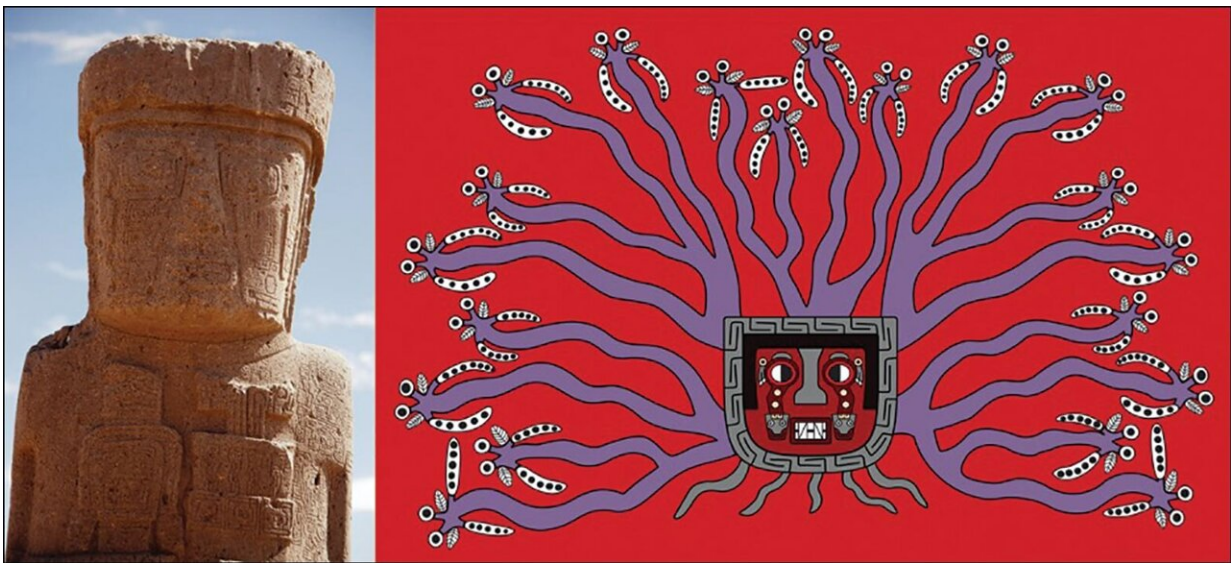


Mix of beer-like drink with psychotropics suggests Wari elites used drugs for political advantage

January 12 2022, by Bob Yirka



Depictions of *Anadenanthera colubrina* use in the Middle Horizon: left) the Ponce Stele at Tiahuanaco portrays an elite individual holding a drinking cup and snuff tablet (photograph courtesy of A. Roddick); right) a vessel from the Wari site of Conchopata features the tree and its tell-tale seed pods sprouting from the head of the Staff God (illustration courtesy of J. Ochatoma Paravicino). Credit: DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2021.177

A team of researchers from Dickinson College, the Royal Ontario Museum and the University of Rochester, has found evidence of pre-

Columbian Andes elites using drugged beverages to promote political advantage. In their paper published in the journal *Antiquity*, the group describes finding evidence of a beer-like beverage laced with a psychotropic drug and given to commoners by an elite group in their society, and their theory on why it was done.

In this new effort, the researchers were working at a dig site at Quilcapampa, in southern Peru. Prior research has shown the site was once home to a Wari village. The Wari people lived in the mountains of what is now Peru from approximately 600 to 1000 CE. Prior work has shown that the Wari people were divided between elites and commoners. The elites were made up of political and [religious leaders](#) who had access to commodities that were not generally available to everyone else. One such commodity was vilca, a strong hallucinogen made from the seeds of the vilca tree. Elites crushed them and snorted the material inside. The seeds were not readily available to commoners because the trees grew approximately 400 mountainous kilometers from where they lived. Planned excursions appeared to be the means of obtaining the seeds.

As they were digging, the researchers found a cache of a large number of fruit remnants from the molle tree. Prior research has shown that the fruit was used to make a beer-like beverage called chicha. It was mixed with the remains of other foods, such as potatoes and peanuts. The finding suggested a large feast had been hosted at the site. Further study of the feast remnants showed that vilca seeds had been mixed in with the chicha, creating what the researchers describe as a mellow psychedelic state in those who were imbibing. And in this case, because of the large amount of fruit that had been used, it seems the consumers of the beverages were commoners.



Vilca seed recovered from Component II at Quilcapampa (scale in cm; photograph by M. Biwer). Credit: DOI: [10.15184/aqy.2021.177](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.177)

The researchers theorize that the elites spiked the beer as a way to demonstrate their power to the commoners, solidifying their position. They also suggest that doing so also instilled goodwill between the commoners and the elites allowing society to function as a cohesive unit.



Carbonised molle drupes presenting evidence for boiling and/or soaking to brew chicha molle (scale in mm; photograph by M. Biwer). Credit: DOI: [10.15184/aqy.2021.177](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.177)



Molle pit located in Component II (Locus 2707) (photograph by S. Bautista).
Credit: DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2021.177

More information: Matthew E. Biwer et al, Hallucinogens, alcohol and shifting leadership strategies in the ancient Peruvian Andes, *Antiquity* (2022). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2021.177](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.177)

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