Original Manuscript

THE LORDS OF THE VALLEY: FROM THE EARLIEST POTTERS TO THE INCA CONQUEST AT THE HEART OF CATAMARCA

Journals of Arts & Humanities Studies
Vol. 1: Issue 2
Page 23–30 © The Author(s) 2025
Received: 10 June 2025
Accepted: 22 June 2025
Published: 26 June 2025

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ABSTRACT

The Central Valley of Catamarca stands out as one of the most captivating archaeological landscapes in Argentina, where millennia of pre-Hispanic history converge into a continuous narrative of cultural transformation. This paper offers an updated synthesis of human occupation in the region, spanning from the Formative Period (circa 400 BCE) to the Inca domination (1480–1536 CE), and reveals how this valley emerged as a focal point for technological innovation, social complexity, and political power in the Argentine Northwest. By analyzing archaeological evidence from emblematic sites such as *Pueblo Perdido de la Quebrada*, *Pezuña de Buey*, and the recently discovered Inca terracing systems of *Quebrada del Tala*, we unravel the history of societies that evolved from small agrarian villages into complex ceremonial centers, ultimately integrating into the largest empire of pre-Columbian America: Tawantinsuyu.

KEY WORDS

Central Valley of Catamarca, Northwest Argentina Archaeology, Aguada Culture, Tawantinsuyu, Formative Period, Regional Developments

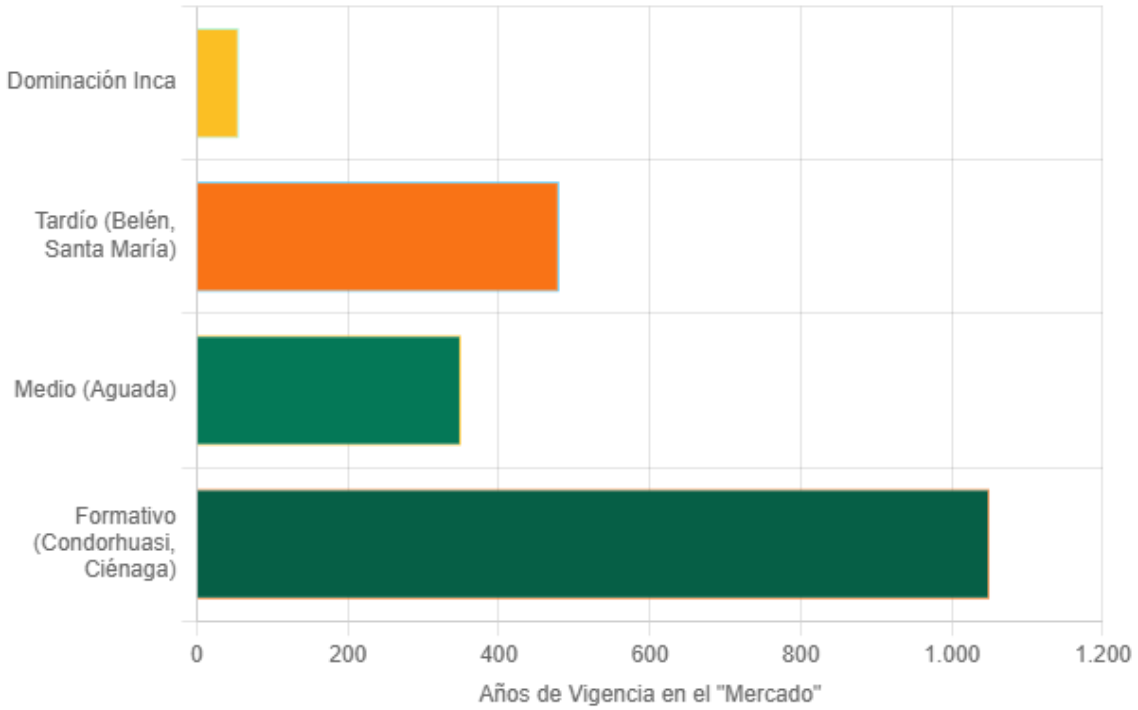
1. Introduction: A Valley that Tells Millennia of Stories

Imagine a valley where every meter of soil conceals the secrets of civilizations that flourished for more than two millennia. The Central Valley of Catamarca is not merely a geographical feature of northwest Argentina; it is an open book chronicling the epic history of societies that transformed an arid landscape into a vibrant center of culture, art, and political power (Puentes, 2019; Williams & Laguens, 2021).

Strategically located at the heart of the Argentine Northwest (NOA), this valley has borne silent witness to an extraordinary succession of cultures that skillfully harnessed its natural resources and geographical advantages. From the earliest pottery-making communities of the Formative Period to the arrival of the Inca conquerors, each society left an indelible imprint on both the landscape and the archaeological record (Melián & Ramos, 2021).

This study presents an updated and comprehensive narrative of this captivating cultural sequence, drawing on recent archaeological investigations that have significantly reshaped our understanding of the region's prehistory. Particularly noteworthy are the discoveries of the last few years concerning Inca presence in the valley, which have opened new perspectives on how the Tawantinsuyu empire profoundly transformed this territory in the decades preceding the Spanish conquest (Fonseca et al., 2022; Moralejo, 2023).

Moreover, this paper contextualizes these findings within broader debates in South American archaeology, emphasizing the interplay between local agency and imperial strategies in shaping regional histories. It highlights not only the material legacies left behind but also the social dynamics and intercultural interactions that characterized the transition from local polities to incorporation into the Inca state. By situating the Central Valley of Catamarca within the wider framework of Andean civilization and state formation, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex historical processes that shaped pre-Columbian societies in the Southern Andes.



2. The Valley Pioneers: Formative Cultures (400 BCE – 650 CE)

2.1. Condorhuasi: Masters of Modeling

The story begins around 400 BCE, when the first sedentary groups established permanent villages in the valley. The Condorhuasi culture, although primarily centered in the Hualfín Valley, extended its influence into the Central Valley, leaving behind one of the most extraordinary ceramic traditions of the Argentine Northwest (Fiant, 2018; Laguens & Lomaglio, 2020).

The Condorhuasi potters were not merely artisans; they were true artists who used clay to express their worldview and beliefs. Their modelled ceramics, featuring exceptional anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations, reveal a society that had developed a complex symbolic system (Ramos & Carafini, 2020). The Diablo, Barrancas, and Alumbrera ceramic phases represent different moments in this tradition, each with

distinctive characteristics that enable archaeologists to reconstruct the temporal evolution of these communities.

Perhaps the most striking testament to the Condorhuasi are the enigmatic lithic sculptures known as *Suplicantes* ("Supplicants"): human figures carved in stone, with raised arms in apparent gestures of supplication or veneration. These sculptures, unique in Argentine archaeology, suggest the existence of complex ritual practices and possibly a cult of deities or ancestors whose meanings are still not fully understood (Melián, 2017; López & Morales, 2019).

2.2. Ciénaga: The Water Engineers

Concurrently, between approximately 70 BCE and 650 CE, the Ciénaga culture flourished. Its bearers demonstrated exceptional mastery of water management in a semi-arid environment. These ancient valley dwellers developed sophisticated irrigation systems that transformed marginal lands into productive fields, laying the groundwork for the agricultural development that would characterize all subsequent societies (Puentes & Fiant, 2016; March, 2021).

Ciénaga ceramics, with their distinctive gray color and incised and painted decorations, reflect not only technical skill but also a refined aesthetic sense. The geometric designs and stylized representations adorning their vessels suggest a shared visual code, possibly linked to group identity and religious beliefs (Carafini, 2019).

What makes this period particularly fascinating is the coexistence and interaction between Condorhuasi and Ciénaga. Far from being isolated entities, these cultures shared the valley's space, exchanging ideas, technologies, and possibly establishing marriage alliances. This early cultural diversity created a rich and complex substrate upon which later societies would develop (Ramos, 2022; Alvarez & Williams, 2020).

3. The Height of Complexity: The Aguada Culture (650–1000 CE)

3.1. A Cultural Revolution

If the Formative Period laid the foundations, the Middle Period (650–1000 CE) represented a genuine revolution in the Central Valley. The Aguada culture emerged as an unprecedented regional integration phenomenon, radically transforming the social, political, and religious landscape of the Argentine Northwest (Kriscautzky, 2015; Puentes, 2020).

Aguada was not merely another culture in the regional sequence; it was a complex cultural system that succeeded in integrating vast territories under a shared ideology. Its iconography, dominated by the omnipresent feline figure and the enigmatic "sacrificer," became a visual language that transcended ethnic and linguistic barriers, uniting dispersed populations under a common belief system (Melián & Fiant, 2019; Lomaglio, 2022).

3.2. Centers of Power and Rituality

Archaeological sites in the Central Valley reveal the scale of this transformation. *Pueblo Perdido de la Quebrada* (PPQ) stands out as one of the most impressive ceremonial centers, with monumental architecture that includes sunken plazas and pyramid-like structures (Ramos et al., 2018). These spaces were not mere constructions; they were stages for rituals that legitimized elite power and reinforced social cohesion.

Pezuña de Buey, another key site dated between 1480±100 and 1270±50 BP, shows us the early face of Aguada. Here, archaeologists have recovered evidence of a society in transition, where Formative traditions intertwined with the innovations that would characterize the classic Aguada period (Carafini & Puentes, 2021).

Quebrada del Tala, with its multiple agricultural and residential settlements, reveals another fundamental aspect: Aguada was not just about ceremonial centers and powerful elites. It was also a network of agricultural communities that sustained the system, producing the surpluses necessary to support specialists, artisans, and priests (Fiant et al., 2020; March & López, 2023).

3.3. Art, Technology, and Power

Aguada ceramics achieved unprecedented levels of technical and artistic excellence. The Gray Incised, Painted, and Portezuelo/Huillapima styles are not mere typological categories; they represent different technological traditions and possibly distinct social groups or ritual functions (Melián, 2023). Metallurgy also experienced remarkable development, with the production of bronze discs decorated with complex mythological scenes, suggesting mastery of both the technical and symbolic dimensions of metalworking (Puentes & Ramos, 2017).

Kriscautzky's (2015, 2019) proposal of an internal sequence (Initial, Classic, and Final/Portezuelo Aguada) allows us to appreciate the dynamic evolution of this culture. Far from being static, it was a system in constant transformation, adapting to environmental, demographic, and political changes over more than three centuries.

4. Fragmentation and Reconfiguration: The Late Period (1000–1480 CE)

4.1. The End of an Era

Around 1000 CE, the Aguada system collapsed. The causes of this collapse remain a matter of scholarly debate: climatic changes, internal conflicts, demographic pressures? What is certain is that the Central Valley, like the rest of the Argentine Northwest (NOA), entered a new phase marked by political fragmentation and the emergence of smaller but equally complex regional entities (Carafini et al., 2022; Morales, 2020).

4.2. New Actors: Belén and Santa María

The Late Period, also known as the Regional Developments Period, witnessed the rise of the Belén and Santa María cultures. Although Belén was centered in the Hualfín Valley, its influence extended to areas bordering the Central Valley (Ramos, 2021). Santa María, developed primarily in the Calchaquíes and Yocavil valleys, represented a different model of social organization, characterized by aggregated settlements and intensive agriculture that sustained increasingly dense populations (Fiant & Melián, 2022; Williams, 2023).

This period was marked by significant demographic growth and, in many areas, heightened conflict. The construction of *pukaras*—hilltop fortresses—suggests a competitive environment and potential confrontations between different groups (Puentes, 2018; Alvarez, 2021). Yet this apparent fragmentation did not preclude cultural development. Santa María ceramics, with their large funerary urns adorned with complex designs, achieved a level of sophistication comparable to that of the Aguada period.

4.3. Setting the Stage

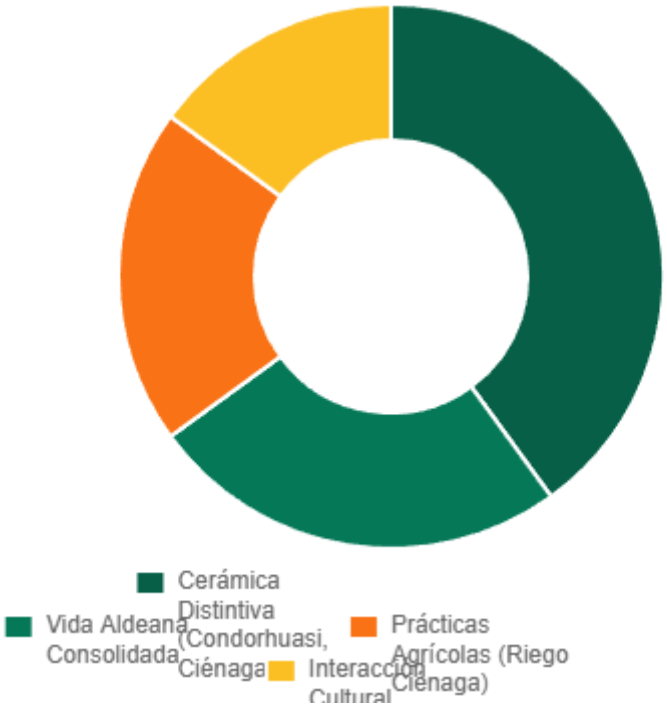
What makes the Late Period particularly fascinating is how it set the stage for the arrival of the Incas. Local societies had developed relatively centralized political systems, productive economies based on intensive agriculture, and exchange networks that connected different ecological zones (Kriscautzky & Ramos, 2020). These local *señoríos* (chiefdoms) were far from simple societies; they represented sophisticated political entities that the Incas would need to conquer, negotiate with, or co-opt.

5. The Great Transformation: The Incas in the Central Valley (1480–1536 CE)

5.1. The Arrival of Tawantinsuyu

Around 1480 CE, the Central Valley of Catamarca witnessed its most dramatic and transformative chapter with the arrival of the armies of Tawantinsuyu. The Incas were not simply conquerors; they were

agents of a grand civilizational project that had managed to weave together much of the Andes under a singular, sophisticated administrative and ideological framework (Moralejo, 2021). Their arrival in the Argentine Northwest (NOA) marked not just a political conquest but the expansion of a vision of imperial integration unparalleled in the Americas. The Incas brought with them not only military might but also advanced technologies, agricultural innovations, and a complex system of governance that would irrevocably alter the trajectory of the Central Valley. This encounter was not merely an imposition; it was a collision of worlds that would reshape landscapes, societies, and historical memory.



The narrative of Inca expansion into the Central Valley must be understood as part of a broader imperial strategy that sought not just to dominate but to incorporate, to assimilate and co-opt diverse regional traditions. Their arrival heralded new opportunities for local elites, new forms of resistance, and new syntheses of cultural identity. The valley was thrust into a whirlwind of change, as the machinery of one of the world's most efficient premodern empires set its sights on this crucial crossroads of the southern Andes.

5.2. Strategies of Domination

Archaeological evidence paints a vivid picture of the Inca strategy in the Central Valley, revealing a multifaceted, adaptable, and highly calculated approach. Their expansion was not limited to military imposition; it was a complex operation of coercion interwoven with diplomacy, negotiation, and the strategic co-optation of local elites (Couso, 2019; Laguens, 2024). This sophisticated approach demonstrates the Incas' understanding that the longevity of their rule depended not merely on force but on creating a sustainable system of governance.

Key administrative centers such as *El Shincal de Quimivil*, though located in the neighboring Londres Valley, exemplify the monumental scale of Inca presence. These were not simple outposts or military garrisons; they were microcosms of Cusco itself, complete with grand ceremonial plazas, ritual *ushnus*, administrative *kallancas*, and vast storage facilities. These centers served multiple functions—political, economic, religious—and acted as powerful symbols of the empire's reach. Their architecture spoke of state power, their rituals of cosmological order, and their infrastructure of an empire engineered to endure. The Inca presence was a statement: they were here not just to conquer, but to restructure society from its very foundations.

5.3. Transforming the Productive Landscape

Among the most breathtaking revelations of recent years is the discovery of vast Inca agricultural terracing systems in *Quebrada del Tala*, unearthed through meticulous research by Fonseca and his team (Fonseca et al., 2022; Fonseca & Puentes, 2024). These terraces, stretching across steep mountainsides between 2400 and 2700 meters above sea level, are not mere remnants of a forgotten past but living testimony to the vision and engineering prowess of the Inca state.

These were not minor adaptations of existing systems; they were transformative interventions that reshaped entire ecosystems. The terracing of *Quebrada del Tala*, with clear evidence of intensive potato and maize cultivation, reveals not just agricultural ingenuity but an understanding of how to manipulate microclimates, control erosion, and optimize productivity on challenging terrain (Puentes & Fonseca, 2023). The presence of Inca ceramics and the strategic layout of the terraces point to direct state supervision, a calculated imperial investment designed to feed garrisons, support *mitayos* (state laborers), and sustain *mitimaes* (relocated populations). This was empire-building at its most tangible, reshaping both nature and society.

5.4. The Qhapaq Ñan: Connecting the Empire

The *Qhapaq Ñan*—the legendary Inca Great Road—was not merely a network of paths; it was the lifeblood of the empire, the great circulatory system that enabled the rapid flow of people, goods, information, and military force across vast and diverse landscapes (Moralejo, 2020; Williams & Morales, 2024). The sections of the Qhapaq Ñan that crossed the Central Valley were arteries pulsing with imperial power, connecting this region to the empire's administrative heart in Cusco and to the frontiers of its domains.

These routes were marvels of engineering and foresight. Many built upon or enhanced preexisting paths, they facilitated not only military movements and supply lines but also diplomatic missions, tribute collection, and the movement of *chasquis* (imperial messengers) and llama caravans laden with goods. The Qhapaq Ñan was an instrument of control, but it was also a conduit of cultural exchange, facilitating the flow of ideas, styles, and people that enriched and transformed the social fabric of the Central Valley.

5.5. Social and Religious Reorganization

The Inca domination brought a profound restructuring of local societies, imposing new social hierarchies and economic systems. Evidence points to the standardization of ceramic production, likely under state control, which not only streamlined material culture but also served to reinforce imperial ideology (Couso et al., 2022). Metal production, too, intensified, with artisans working to meet the demands of an empire that prized prestige goods and technological sophistication (Puentes, 2021).

On the ideological front, the Incas demonstrated a masterful approach to cultural integration. Local *wak'as*—sacred sites deeply embedded in community identity—were not destroyed but absorbed into the imperial cosmology, subordinated to the overarching solar cult (Kriscautzky & Moralejo, 2019; Lomaglio & Alvarez, 2023). This strategy allowed the Incas to maintain a veneer of continuity with local traditions while subtly realigning them to fit imperial narratives, a sophisticated method of cultural hegemony that minimized resistance and maximized compliance.

5.6. Resistance and Negotiation

Inca control was far from total and uncontested. The persistence of local ceramic styles, particularly the distinctive Santa María tradition, suggests that local populations actively maintained aspects of their cultural identity, resisting homogenization (Fonseca, 2020). In some areas, the limited presence of provincial Inca ceramics hints at incomplete imperial control and the existence of semi-autonomous spaces (Couso & Puentes, 2021).

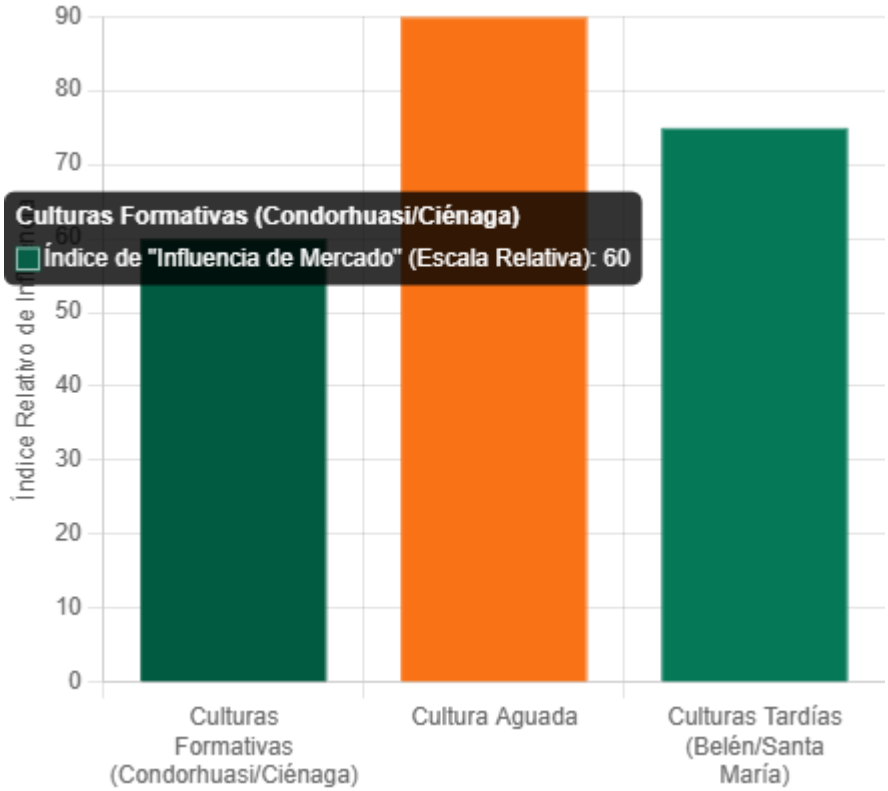
Resistance did not always manifest in open rebellion. It often took subtle forms: the quiet continuation of local rituals, the stubborn persistence of traditional technologies, the localized reinterpretation of Inca symbols to fit preexisting belief systems (Moralejo et al., 2022). This created a hybrid cultural landscape

where local and imperial elements intertwined in complex, sometimes contradictory ways, reflecting both accommodation and defiance.

5.7. The Imperial Legacy

Though brief—barely half a century—the Inca presence in the Central Valley left an indelible mark on its landscape, its social structures, and its historical consciousness. The agricultural terraces continued to be used during the colonial period, and many remain in operation today (Fonseca & Kriscautzky, 2023). The administrative reorganization imposed by the Incas influenced not only immediate post-conquest settlement patterns but also the social and political landscape of the colonial and republican eras.

The memory of the Incas persisted in the oral traditions of local communities, blending seamlessly with narratives of the Spanish conquest. These stories continue to echo in the cultural identity of the valley's inhabitants, reminding us that the legacy of Tawantinsuyu is not just a chapter of the past—it is a living presence in the cultural palimpsest of the southern Andes (Puentes et al., 2024).



6. Conclusions: A Valley that Continues to Tell Stories

The Central Valley of Catamarca emerges from this exploration not merely as a geographic location but as a dynamic, living laboratory where millennia of human ingenuity, resilience, and cultural negotiation have unfolded. Its story is not a linear progression of cultural replacement, but a rich, intricate palimpsest where each layer reveals continuities, disruptions, innovations, and accommodations that have defined the trajectory of the southern Andes.

From the humble Formative settlements that laid the groundwork for sedentary life and agricultural innovation, to the monumental expansion of Tawantinsuyu, each epoch in this valley's history has added new dimensions to a complex cultural mosaic. The evidence from ceramic traditions, architectural remnants, agricultural infrastructures, and oral histories challenges simplistic narratives of cultural succession and replacement. Instead, it invites us to appreciate a continuous dialogue between local agency and external pressures, between tradition and innovation, between resilience and transformation.

The recent discoveries, particularly the vast Inca terracing systems at *Quebrada del Tala*, not only expand our understanding of imperial strategies but also force us to rethink how local communities navigated these dramatic changes. These terraces, far from being mere vestiges of a vanished past, symbolize a sophisticated synergy between imperial engineering and local knowledge, between the demands of a state apparatus and the deep-rooted practices of communities that had inhabited the valley for centuries. They remind us that the Incas did not simply impose an external order, but often integrated and reconfigured existing systems, creating a hybrid landscape that was at once local and imperial.

Moreover, the valley's history underscores that cultural transformation was never a unidirectional process. Even under the imposing shadow of Inca imperialism, local societies maintained threads of continuity that resisted total absorption. These acts of resilience—whether through the persistence of ceramic styles, the quiet maintenance of ritual spaces, or the subtle reinterpretation of imperial symbols—demonstrate a profound capacity for cultural negotiation. The valley's past is a testament to the idea that power is never absolute and that cultural identities, however pressured, find ways to persist, adapt, and even flourish.

This narrative does not conclude with the dramatic events of 1536, when Spanish conquistadors arrived and brought with them another wave of upheaval. On the contrary, the valley's story continued into the colonial and republican eras, as Indigenous communities found new ways to adapt, resist, and transform under changing political, social, and economic conditions. The descendants of these communities still inhabit the Central Valley today, speaking to the remarkable continuity of life in this landscape. Their traditions, beliefs, languages, and practices serve as living testaments to the deep temporal roots of this place, connecting the present to a past that stretches back more than two millennia.

The Central Valley of Catamarca teaches us that history is not a static record of the past, but an ongoing process of negotiation and reinterpretation. It is a story written not just in grand monuments and dramatic conquests, but in everyday practices, in the resilience of agricultural techniques, in the intangible heritage of oral traditions, and in the indelible marks left on the landscape itself. Every broken ceramic sherd, every worn terrace, every Quechua-inflected word whispered in local Spanish carries the weight of generations who lived, loved, fought, and dreamed in this valley.

The grandeur of Tawantinsuyu, often seen as the pinnacle of pre-Hispanic Andean civilization, does not overshadow the brilliance of the cultures that preceded it. Rather, the magnificence of the Inca empire was constructed upon the enduring foundations laid by generations of Andean peoples who had already transformed the Central Valley into a vibrant hub of innovation and cultural synthesis. These societies—Condorhuasi, Ciénaga, Aguada, Belén, Santa María—were not passive recipients of external influences, but active agents who shaped their world with creativity and determination.

Their legacy persists not only in the silent remnants of stone walls and pottery fragments but in the living, breathing culture of the valley today. It endures in the agricultural terraces still in use, in the memory of place names and local legends, and in the social fabric of the communities who continue to call this valley home. The Central Valley's story reminds us that the past is never truly gone; it lives on in the present, waiting to be rediscovered and reinterpreted by each generation of archaeologists, historians, and community members who dare to listen to its ancient whispers.

In the grand narrative of Andean history, the Central Valley of Catamarca stands not as a footnote but as a vibrant chapter—a testament to the enduring human spirit that has, for more than two millennia, adapted, resisted, created, and thrived amidst the shifting tides of history.