This is a fragment from a tapestry tunic, a uniform for officers of the Wari civilization of the central Andes, dating from the Middle Horizon, ca. 500-1000 A.D. Many such fragments have been misattributed to the Tiwanaku or even Nasca cultures, which overlapped with the Wari in temporal and geographical extent. Confusion may arise because this fragment was likely found as a mummy wrapping in the central or southern coast of modern-day Peru, where access to arid areas for burial enhanced the preservation of textiles. Although the Wari were from the highlands, they did expand their control to the coast. More defining characteristics include the use of more abstract imagery, a more adventurous use of color, and subtle structural differences. We still do not understand the relationship between the Wari and Tiwanaku, but this example nonetheless demonstrates the extent to which civilizations overlap. For instance, the Inca, whom we may consider to be the civilization of the Andean region, were actually preceded by numerous other peoples, who in turn developed from previous civilizations.

A complete tunic would have four narrow panels of similar design oriented symmetrically about the center axis. Two panels at a time would be woven together in a narrow strip on a vertical loom with the cotton warp yarns oriented horizontally, not vertically as is often done today. The panels would be sewn up the center with a slit left for the head, folded at the shoulder, and sewn up the sides with holes left for the arms. This fragment has been cut below the shoulder and between two panels, but the bottom and right edges remain intact. The construction of these tunics corroborates their cultural designation: the stiff fabric and square shape would have fallen below the knees and elbows when worn, creating a cylindrical shape emphasizing or creating the illusion of the barrel-chested body shape of the Wari, which developed as a physiological adaptation to life at high altitudes.

The imagery in this piece is common to several cultures and performs similar functions, yet is articulated by the Wari in a different way. The standardization of imagery across textiles and other media, especially architecture, suggests political or religious control over the use of symbols. In the Wari and Tiwanaku civilizations, images from stone carvings were repeated, abstracted, compressed, and expanded, emphasizing the rectilinear and thus imperial power and its ability to order the world. The pattern on this fragment, a profile face with a vertical split eye and crossed fangs, and an inverted stepped fret motif, is a common Wari design. The use of both cotton and camelid fibers (available at the coast and highlands, respectively) is more specific to the Wari, whose geographical position gave them access to both yarn types. Most distinctly Wari are structural differences, such as interlocking weft threads, warp threads cut along and then chained or obliquely interlaced, and in the solid bands, barely perceptible diagonal ‘lazy lines’ that indicate the work of multiple individuals on a single piece. As with many other fine textiles, the intense amount of work, materials, and expertise required to create such tunics indicates their role as markers of prestige and empowerment, both for the wearer and the state.

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Special thanks to Amy Oakland and Donald Proulx

Bibliography:


