



Unravelling the mysteries

Wari cultic cloths have an intricacy of construction that has proved intriguing and often baffling. Drawing on her own experiments as well as deep knowledge of the Andean culture, Patricia J. Knobloch reveals some of their secrets.

1 Wari slip-painted ceramic human effigy figure clad in a four-cornered hat and a tapestry-woven tunic with columns of the split face and fret pattern, Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Height 28.7 cm. Fundación Museo Amano, Lima FMAC-000020
Photo: Daniel Antonio Giannoni Succar.

2 Wari tapestry-woven tunic with columns of the split face and fret pattern,,Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Camelid fibre and cotton. National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC, 23/8338



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Imagine living a life in which all knowledge was taught from the spoken word and held as a visual memory. To think and to imagine thus would be a 'filming' of the real world intertwined with mythological stories of formidable supernatural beings. This scenario describes the lives of millions who lived for thousands of years in the New World.

Now imagine waking up in a bustling ancient metropolis high in the Andes. The citadel-like

settlement is perched along a mesa cliff with approximately a square mile of households, workshops, storage buildings and ceremonial centres behind its formidable exterior walls. Known as Huari, this city was the cosmopolitan capital of South America's first state, the Wari Empire. This political territory embraced most of modern-day Peru.

Though seldom starring on the world stage, the Wari culture has recently caught public



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attention in the United States with the travelling exhibition 'Wari: Lords of the Andes' organised by Cleveland Museum of Art curator Susan Bergh. Ceramic figurines and human effigy vessels record Wari individuals as staunch rulers and brave warriors. Their high-ranked identity was marked by the opulence of finely woven tunics, mystifying four-cornered hats and highly crafted accessories. Attendees become admirers

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as they realise that, 'once upon a time, in a land not so far away', an amazing story of religious quest and military conquest bound together a realm of autonomous cultures much like the Roman Empire.

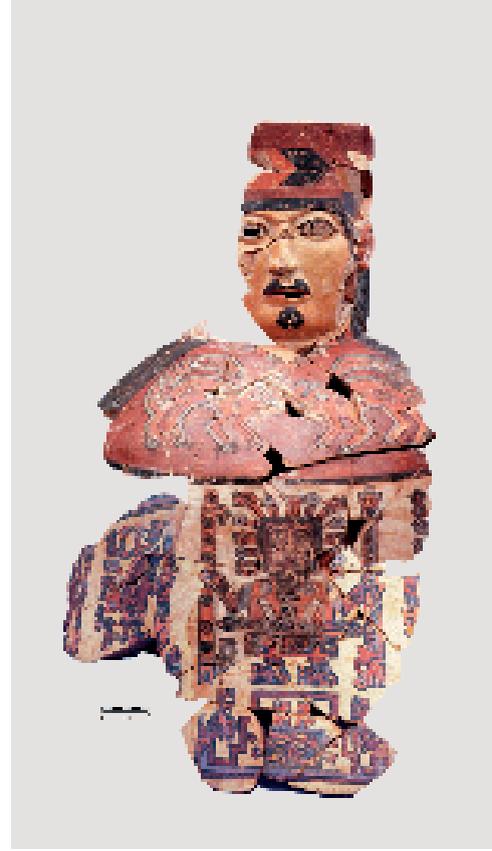
As calculated as it may seem in hindsight, remarkably, the Wari state developed through trial and error; there was no Greek predecessor. Lasting about two centuries (800-1000 AD), the empire's binding strengths of religious indoctrination and widening benefits of trade networks eventually succumbed to ancestral cults and challenging competitors. In the end, the Wari took a great wealth of knowledge with them to

their graves - what they wore in life, they wore in death - leaving us with many intriguing mysteries. So, can we ever know who they were?

Wari ancestors lived in small communities of agro-pastoralists, known as the Huarpa culture, within the fertile Ayacucho Valley some 200 miles southeast of Lima. The Huarpa initiated contacts with the south coast Nasca culture. Museums worldwide have collections

of the astonishingly beautiful pottery made during Nasca's era of grandeur (300-700 AD). However, their craftsmanship was in decline when the Wari advanced out of their valley. Their coastal connection begins the narrative of Wari identity discussed here.

Wari intrusion continued as they built well-planned outposts, almost as far south as Chile, laying the pathways for later Inca conquerors. Wari imperial sites are gridded layouts of rectangular households/workshops that have open interior patios surrounded by narrow rooms, presumably with thatch roofs, but lack exterior windows or doors, suggesting access by ladders.



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One of the largest settlements was built in the southern highlands near Cusco - the eventual capital of the Inca Empire - and another in the northern highlands east of Trujillo; both have three-storey-high walls and evidence of sudden abandonment.

Along these trajectories through the jagged Andes were isolated communities with autonomous authorities, be they tribal chiefs or heads of households, as well as numerous languages. Extrapolating back in time from ethnohistoric data, there could have been over a hundred ethnic groups in the Wari realm. The vast ethnic identities of these Peruvian ancestors are starting to be recognised in the recovery of human imagery on Wari artefacts (despite the problem of looted sites). This discussion focuses on Wari identities discerned from ceramic figurines and vessels and two types of male elite clothing: tunics and four-cornered hats.

The Wari welded together their segmented partnerships with trade, and rewarded allegiances with prestigious clothing and highly crafted pottery. Such material wealth could win hearts, but for the Wari to win minds they also offered supernatural experiences during cultic rituals. These involved hallucinogens, beer and general feasting. The Wari cult was a revival of deity forms from the more ancient Chavín culture in the far north Highlands and



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3 Wari tapestry-woven short tunic with felines flanking the centre neck area. Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Camelid fibre and cotton. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, no.348

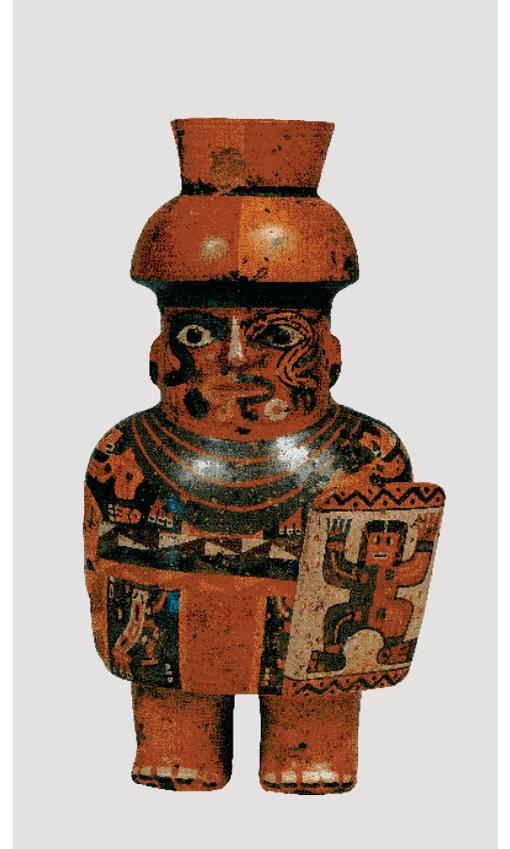
4 Composite Wari human effigy jar showing a short tunic with felines and body garment with staffed beings, excavated at Conchopata by William Isbell's 1977 Huari Urban Prehistory Project, Ayacucho, Peru. [Photos: Willaim H. Isbell](#)

5 Wari tunic fragments with bird-headed staff-bearing creatures in profile. Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Camelid fibre and cotton. Each approx. 0.53 x 0.90m (1'9" x 2'11"). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 2005.53.a-b

6 Wari slip-painted ceramic human effigy jar, Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Collezione Federico Balzarotti al Castello Sforzesco, no.1366

Pucara culture of the southern Altiplano, north of Lake Titicaca. These icons held staffs, trophy heads, headless bodies and human prisoners. In the southern Andean region, the iconic motifs were sustained for centuries on tapestry-woven textiles in the provincial Pucara style. The revival - known as the Southern Andean Iconographic Series - found a foothold south of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia's Tiwanaku culture, and in Chile's Atacama culture in the northern Wari control. But the imagery was alien in the Wari heartland until one day visitors arrived.

In 1977, 23 large human effigy jars were recovered at a site a few miles south of Huari (4). The necks depict individualised faces whereas the vessels' bodies display similar garments. The shoulders display short tunics decorated with feline figures, usually two in profile flanking the wearer's head (3). A similar layout of two types of supernatural beings covers the body area on most of the jars. A primary, anthropomorphic deity stands atop a stepped pyramid and holds a staff in each hand. It, too, is flanked by two rows of smaller, oddly designed anthropomorphic beings in a profile stance holding one staff. The flanking pattern is not only similar to the primary and secondary icons carved into Tiwanaku's famous Gateway of the Sun, but the Wari version of the primary deity so



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closely matches one carved on a Tiwanaku stone statue that it could have come from a rubbing.

Wari objects never occur at Tiwanaku, so the sharing of icons was more likely carried about through textile images to which both cultures had access. Perhaps these jars record the historic event of Wari traders or travelling shamans with the intent to spread ancestral doctrines and ancient promises of supernatural beliefs.

After this protracted involvement, the Wari enhanced this cult of primary and secondary icons, though in a peculiar and more political way than to pay homage to them with stone carvings. Woven cloth has been as crucial to Andean life as food and water. Cloth was never cut and sewn into 'tailored' attire. Spinning and weaving held a spiritual relationship to the duality between the natural and the supernatural worlds. To transform natural fibres into yarns was to capture the life and death forces of nature and the cosmos. To manipulate yarns into a vertical (warp) and horizontal (weft) was to entwine these forces into the miraculous balance known as cloth. Such 'cultic cloth' was meant to be worn directly from the loom, uncut and unharmed.

Thus Andean attire builds upon a rectangle shape. Tunics are made from two rectangular panels sewn together to close the middle seam towards a centre head opening, then folded in



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half and the side seams sewn to the arm openings. In most such tunics, the cotton warp yarns are not dyed because they are completely covered by the dyed, camelid fibre weft yarns.

The colour range and spinning of Andean yarns is astounding. Tapestry weave allowed for insightful narration in recording iconography. Many Wari tapestries display vertical columns of supernatural creatures in profile (5). They are often shown holding a staff similar to those associated with the primary deity figures on ceremonial pottery. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the Wari reified their prestige with such sumptuous attire to appear more godlike as a human flanked by supernatural beings. Perhaps they were establishing a rapport with their gods for protection in battle. One ceramic human effigy jar displays a fierce warrior wearing such a tunic and confidently holding an axe in one hand and shield in another (6). In Wari's highly charged cosmology one could ask whether this warrior was heading into battle against the living or the dead or both.

Though tapestry-woven tunics were most common, the Wari weavers developed techniques that set them apart from the rest of the world. Among these are discontinuous warp and weft (DWW); a baffling tie-dyed method; and the knotted fabric of four-cornered hats. The term 'discontinuous' is meant to point out that yarns do not continue completely from one edge to the other on the cloth. To describe the DWW tech-

nique is to picture pieces of cloth joined to each other like modern patchwork quilting (7). However, the pieces are not cut out from cloth. Each angular piece or design unit is completely woven and interlocks with another as though darned to the next; but how did they manage to darn one piece without the others already in place with which to join? This conundrum was resolved with the recovery of unfinished DWW cloth. Apparently, a few yarns were set as temporary wefts to anchor sections of warp yarns - like a vertical column of connected mini-looms. The warp yarns were added and then the permanent weft yarns were woven.

If the DWW technique was not difficult enough, the Wari decorated each design unit with dyes. However, dyes cannot be applied to one design unit without bleeding into the next. Textile experts suggest that the Wari developed an ingenious method to resolve this problem. The entire, undyed cloth was initially completed but without interlocking yarns along the temporary weft joins or stitching along the warp edges. Then the temporary weft yarns were removed and each DWW design unit carefully separated and dyed. Reassembly was accomplished by rethreading permanent weft yarns through the end loops of warp yarns and sewing warp edges together with overcast stitches. The desire for such cloth may have been the possible allure of being reversible. With both sides in balance, life forces could pass unfettered to



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7 Wari tie-dyed discontinuous warp and weft tunic fragment with opposed hooks. Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Camelid fibre, 0.83 x 1.51m (2'7" x 4'11"). Private Collection.

Photo: Renéé Comet Photography

8 Wari four-cornered pile hat, Peru, 7th-9th century AD. Camelid fibre, cotton, 12.5 x 17.5cm (5" x 7"). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Arthur M. Bullowa, 1983 (1983.497.6). The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

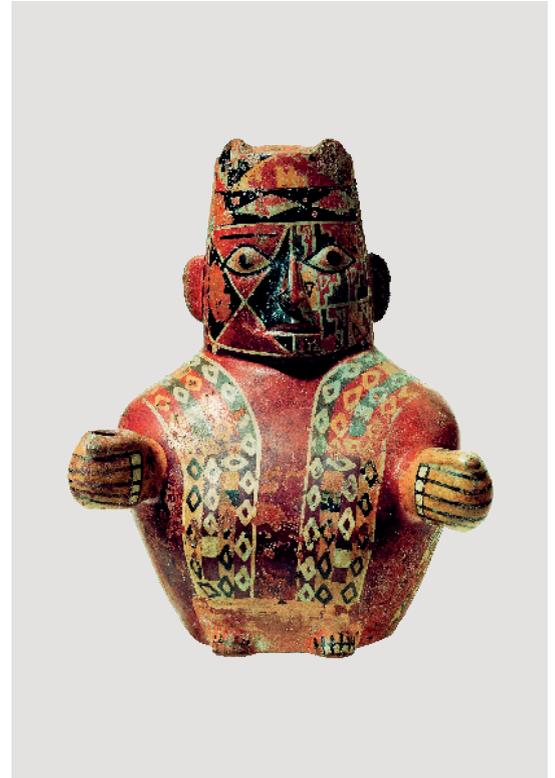
9 Wari Viñaque-style slip-painted ceramic human effigy figure in tie-dyed tunic and four-cornered hat, Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Height 30cm (12"). Museum Rietberg, Zurich, RPB 320

Photo: Rainer Wolfsberger

and fro through the cloth between the wearer and his spiritual world.

Tie-dyeing may seem an easy way to colour cloth, but these were not your 1960s T-shirts. On closer inspection the tiny, diamond circlets are so numerous and closely arranged that determining what tool or method was used is still a mystery. My attempts to reproduce these designs indicate that tying produces circular forms and not the sharp angles of the diamond elements. To achieve those edges, the cloth must be folded twice to form corners that are pinched between flat edges as if stapled. The edges may have come from pushing the corners through slits in small toothpick-like sticks. Thus, 'tie-dyed' disguises our ignorance of how the Wari made these textiles. What is certain – as textile experts will attest – is that making tie-dyed DWW textiles was no less difficult or time consuming than tapestry work. Yet, they were very popular among the Wari. Unfortunately, the craftsmanship died with them.

Four-cornered hats present another mystery (8). They are box shaped so there are four rectangular sides and a top rectangle. The box is narrowed at the top by sewing together a small section of each corner before adding the top piece. The corners are embellished with triangular or tubular tips or tassels. On human effigy jars the corners are accentuated with 'step' designs. Perhaps, the points were symbolic of a connection to powers from above and drew



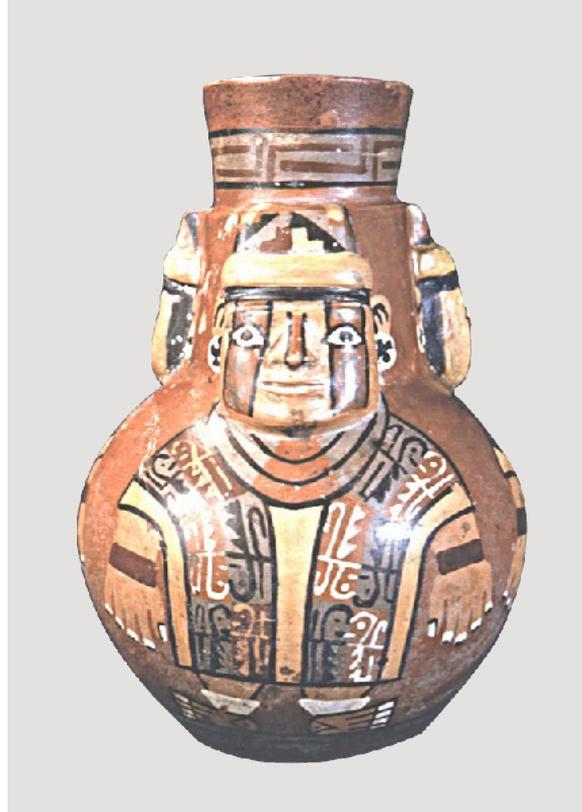
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upon the metaphor of sacred mountain peaks touching the sky. The four corners would draw on such forces from all the cardinal points.

Not only are these hats uniquely shaped, they are unique among world cloth as being made row by row from interlocked 'larks head' knots. One 9-10m-long yarn creates the foundation as it is knotted with coloured yarns inserted with each knot, cut to look like pile. Though the knotting would seem easy to accomplish using a needle, the tens of thousands of long pulls seem unreasonable and would probably disintegrate the foundation yarn. I devised a method similar to tatting with a bobbin that works along short sections of the yarn, pushing it in and out of loops to form larks head knots. Though this was more efficient, the estimated time to finish a four-corner hat came to 350 hours. But, again, only the Wari knew the correct method.

With the thousands of Wari tunics and hundreds of hats in museum collections worldwide, there remains yet another mystery. Which tunic was associated with which hat? Only a handful of Wari burials have escaped pillaging by grave robbers (*huaqueros*), who sell these items more easily as separate pieces. Human effigy vessels provide some indications. One Wari individual is well documented by his visage on artefacts found throughout the empire. His face is divided with an X shape of contrasting colours on one side and a checkerboard of colourful step frets on the other (1, 9).





10 Wari tapestry-woven tunic, Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Camelid fibre and cotton. Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich, NM 244. Photo: Marietta Weidner

11 Wari ceramic human effigy vase, Peru, ca. 600-1000 AD. Milwaukee Public Museum, A54570.

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Two ceramic figures show him wearing a four-cornered hat of similar design, but different tunics; one a tie-dyed DWW design and the other of tapestry-woven symbols known as the split face and fret pattern (2). Indeed, he was a supreme Wari dignitary. Though hundreds of tunics (mostly remnants) are known, there are almost as many slight variations in their designs. Such nuances suggest that each elite valued a personal pride or ethnic identity as much as his membership in the Wari Empire. Lamentably, this ancestral pride may never be fully restored.

Wari ethnic identity depends upon mapping the homelands of each group. Many Wari sites have been destroyed by agriculture, sand and gravel businesses and the sprawl of modern habitation. Once out of the ground the ancient heritage is lost. Some exceptions are fragments left behind by *huaqueros* digging in dry caves or desert locales. Most complete textiles with provenances are from excavations on the coast by early archaeologists who got there first.

One such example is a burial from the south coast Nasca region of a Wari elite who wore a tapestry-woven tunic with simple yet appealing motifs. The burial included numerous ceramic vessels and other textiles. (Regrettably, this burial was on display and destroyed during the Second World War bombing of Berlin.) Such tunic motifs reflect a canny perception of 'mirrored' imagery as another means to effect

balance (10). Half of the motif shows a profile, monkey-like creature and with its mirrored other half in reversed colours one sees a full face and body. The image is also cleverly mirrored from right side up to upside down along the tunic's panels. A figurine bottle depicts three Wari individuals wearing the same attire with four-cornered hats (11). The faces have vertical bands of X markings. The bottle's imagery and the numerous unprovenanced examples of these 'mirrored' tunics define another possible ethnic identity. But where did they call 'home'?

These exceptional examples that match clothing with imagery are crucial in reconstructing the ethnic landscape and identities of the ancient Wari. Today's Peruvians have great difficulty in exploring their ancestry beyond the Inca. Every artefact that leaves their country for the world's illicit antiquities trade contributes to the destruction of their rightful heritage. We can certainly thank museums and curators, such as Susan Bergh, for educating and lifting public appreciation in the Wari. Hopefully, continued preservation and research may someday unravel more clues to this glorious yet mysterious culture.

'Wari: Lords of the Andes' opened at The Cleveland Museum of Art in October 2012, travelled to the Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale, and closes at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth on 8 September 2013 ♦♦