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## The Cerro Illucán Collection of Wari Objects

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## The Cerro Ilucán Collection of Wari Objects

Brian S. Bauer (University of Illinois Chicago, [bsb@uic.edu](mailto:bsb@uic.edu)) reports on an informal excavation conducted by local people at Cerro Ilucán in the Department of Cajamarca.

During Semana Santa (April 9–15) of 2017 two brothers and a friend, all from the town of Cutervo (Cajamarca Department), gathered at Cerro Ilucán, a steep ridge immediately northeast of the town (Figure 1). Although most of the narrow ridgetop had been heavily looted, they were there in search of riches. Certainly to their surprise, while digging they found an array of gold and silver objects which, after several days of reflection, they decided to turn over to the town officials. Within two weeks, news of the discovery was posted across various internet sites and the director of The Royal Tombs of Sipán Museum in Lambayeque, Walter Alva, announced that the finds were associated with the Wari (A.D. 600–1000). The number of objects, almost ninety in all, is astounding, representing one of the largest collections of Wari metal artefacts recovered at one location. Nevertheless, after only a few weeks of notoriety, the discovery receded from public discussion and the collection has yet to be described in detail. In this report, I provide an inventory of the Cerro Ilucán collection and compare it to other examples of Wari metalwork so that this collection will become better known.



Figure 1: The town of Cutervo as seen from the summit of Cerro Ilucán.

Until recently, little was known about the metalwork of the Wari. This dearth of knowledge is highlighted by the fact that the three largest overviews of Wari art published in the past forty years (Bazan 2001:440–453; Bergh 2012; Lavalley 1984:166–171) each offer fewer than ten examples of silver or gold objects, almost all of which come from unknown proveniences. So few Wari objects of silver and gold had been recovered by the mid-1990s, that a prominent art historian suggested such objects were not in wide circulation in Wari times, writing “Not a great deal of it has been found, so perhaps it was not a high-priority medium, sufficiently restricted as to be kept purposefully scarce, or looted by later peoples” (Stone-Miller 1994:150). A few gold and silver items have been found during excavations at Wari sites, but these tend to be fragments of sheet metal or small ornaments (Jennings and Yépez Álvarez 2015; Ríos 1987; Schreiber 1992; Skidmore 2014; Williams and Isla 2002; Yépez Álvarez and Jennings 2012). Even excavations at the capital city of the Wari, which is known to have multi-story underground mausoleums and impressive stone slab tombs that most certainly held the highest-ranking nobles, have recovered only a few gold and silver artifacts (Brewster-

Wray 1990; Ochatoma Paravicino 2007; Ochatoma Paravicino *et al.* 2015). Three small collections of fine Wari metalwork have, however, been found in the Cusco region (Bauer and Fonseca 2024); these include a cache of silver and gold objects from the site of Kullupata (Pomachachi) (Chávez 1985, 1987) and two shaft offerings discovered at the large Wari site of Pikillacta (Arriola Tuni and Tesar 2011; Cuba Muniz and Amachi Flores 2019).

In addition to these finds, three extensive collections of Wari silver and gold objects were found in widely separate sites during the 2010s. Excavations at the Castillo de Huarney, along the Pacific Coast, uncovered a large burial of elite women, some of whom were interred with impressive metal earspools and a few other silver and gold objects (Giersz and Pardo 2014). Work at the site of Espíritu Pampa in the Vilcabamba (Cusco) region, some 110 kilometers southeast of the Wari capital, provided elite Wari metalwork from very different contexts, including a series of individual burials which contained a broad range of silver and gold objects (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020). The third large collection is that of Cerro Ilucán. Although a vast amount of information has been lost through looting, the Cerro Ilucán collection is significant and represents one of the largest collections of Wari objects found and which, unlike those of Castillo de Huarney and Espíritu Pampa, remain to be described.

### The Cerro Ilucán Collection

In June of 2017, I visited Cutervo and the town council granted me permission to take photographs of the objects found a few months earlier on Cerro Ilucán, as well as an additional gold plume which had been turned over to the council.<sup>1</sup> These photographs are published here with the permission of the town council. he

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted all photographs were taken by Brian S. Bauer.

Cerro Ilucán collection holds fifty-two gold and thirty-seven silver objects, all of which are in good states of preservation. The collection also contains a wide range of objects, some of which are unique to this collection, while others are like artifacts found at other Wari sites or objects held in museums in the United States and Peru.

### Gold Objects

*Half-spherical adornments:* Among the gold objects found on Cerro Ilucán were thirty-three gold, half-spherical adornments (Figure 2). They each measure about 1.5 centimeters in diameter and have two pairs of two thread holes. A few of the adornments are dented, but most are undamaged.



Figure 2: Gold, half-spherical adornments.

*Circular and tear-shaped sequins:* Eleven circular sequins, slightly less than 2 centimeters wide, with holes in their centers and two thread holes on their rim, as well as four tear-shaped sequins, 3 centimeters long and 2 centimeters wide, also with dual thread holes, are part of the collection (Figure 3). These objects are rather common in elite burials and cannot be associated with any particular culture.



Figure 3: Circular and tear-shaped sequins.

*Earspools:* Two gold-plated, circular earspools, about 6 centimeters in diameter, with silver stems, were found on Cerro Ilucán (Figure 4). Although made of gold and silver, these undecorated earspools are modest in comparison to those that have been recovered at the Castillo de Huarmey (Giersz and Pardo 2014) or in other elite burials on the coast of Peru.



Figure 4: Two undecorated gold and silver earspools.

*Band Ornament:* The Cerro Ilucán collection contains a band of gold, perhaps representing a head ornament (Figure 5). The two ends of the band contain three thread holes each, indicating that the ornament once formed a closed circle. No similar examples associated with the Wari have been published.



Figure 5: A gold band, perhaps a head ornament.

*Plume:* A gold plume, 10 centimeters long with a 4 centimeter stem is included in the collection, even though it was not found within the 2017 cache (Figure 6). Its finder, inspired by the Cerro Ilucán donation, gave it to the town council indicating that it, too, had been found on the ridge. Similar plumes, made of gold and silver, have been found in Wari graves and offerings both on the coast (Bergh 2012:226–227) and in the highlands, including at the sites of Espíritu Pampa (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:88, 113) and Kullupata (Chávez 1985, 1987). Such plumes have also been found in Nasca, Moche, and Chimu contexts on the coast of Peru. This item was found several years before the other Cerro Ilucán items in a different context; however, it most likely dates to the Wari occupation of the region.





Figure 6: A gold plume.

#### Silver Objects

*Vessel Lids:* A circular and a rectangular, vessel lid, both made of sheet silver, are contained within the Cerro Ilucán collection. The circular lid, 13 centimeters in diameter, contains a strap handle which is attached to the lid by two pairs of rivets (Figure 7). The rectangular lid is smaller, 4 by 4.5 centimeters, and it also has a strap handle (Figure 8). The small sizes of these lids suggest that they may have been miniatures. No similar examples of metal vessel lids associated with the Wari have been published.

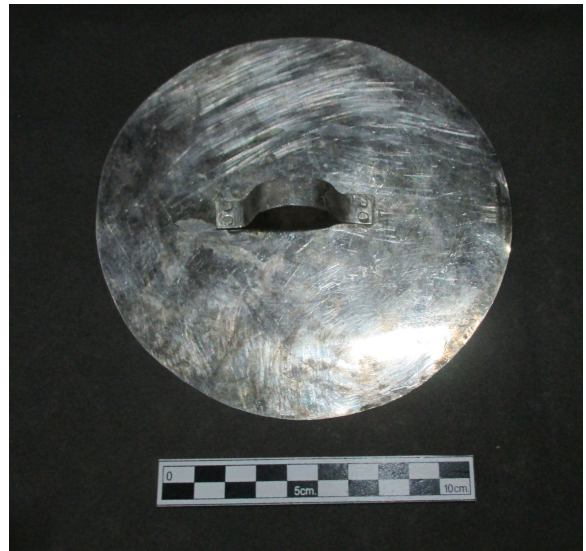


Figure 7: A silver, circular vessel lid.



Figure 8: A silver, rectangular vessel lid.

*Miniature Sandals:* Four pairs of miniature double-strapped, sandals with Y-shaped, toe-thongs are in the collection (Figure 9). Two of the pairs are 5 centimeters long and the other two are 8 centimeters. Each sandal is made from a single cut silver sheet, which is double backed on itself to form the sole as well as the straps. The toe thongs are stabilized by passing their half moon heads through small cuts in the soles of the sandals. Although three of the four pairs could have been slipped on through the back,

the sharp metal edges render these artifacts impracticable as footwear. Nevertheless, there are right and left sandals within each pair. No similar examples associated with the Wari have been published.



Figure 9: Four pairs of miniature, double-strapped, sandals.

*Silver slings and a narrow band:* Three stylized miniature silver slings are in the collection, all of which have similar oval perforated central designs. Two of the slings are about the same size, while the third is much smaller (Figures 10 and 11). The central perforations, which are rhomboidal and triangular, are reminiscent of the perforations cut into copper sheets found in two elaborate offerings at the Wari site of Pikillacta near Cusco (Ariola Tuni and Tesar 2011; Cuba Muniz and Amachi Flores 2019). These slings are also slightly perforated at one end and tooled at the other end.

The collection also includes a rectangular band. Both squared off ends of the band contain thread holes, indicating that the ends of the band were once tied together to form a closed loop (Figure 11).



Figure 10: Two differently sized silver slings with oval perforated, central designs.



Figure 11: A rectangular silver band and a silver sling with an oval perforated, central design.

*Silver Shafts:* Three long, slender, cylindrical shafts, with pineapple-like head designs, and pointed ends were recovered on Cerro Ilucán (Figure 12). Two of the shafts are similar in size and form a pair, while the third is similar in style, but is much larger. The two smaller shafts measure a little longer than 10 centimeters, while the large shaft is about 27 centimeters in length. No shafts with similar heads have been recorded in other Wari contexts.



Figure 12: Two short and one long silver shafts with pineapple-like head designs.





Figure 13: Five of the six miniature silver spears found on Cerro Ilucán.

*Miniature weapons:* A series of miniature silver weapons are part of the collection. They include six miniature spears (Figure 13), four miniature spear-throwers of different sizes (Figure 14), and one miniature battle axe (Figure 15). Miniature copper statuettes wielding similar weapons have been recorded in two large offerings at the site of Pikillacta (Arriola Tuni and Tesar 2011; Cuba Muniz and Amachi Flores 2019), but stand-alone examples of such miniature weapons have not been reported elsewhere.



Figure 14: Four miniature spear-throwers.



Figure 15: A miniature silver battle axe.

*Silver brooches:* Two rectangular silver brooches with sliding pins are part of the collection (Figure 16). The top and bottom edges of the brooches are marked with chevrons. While chevrons are common design element in Wari ceramics and metalwork, no similar brooches have been reported within Wari collections.

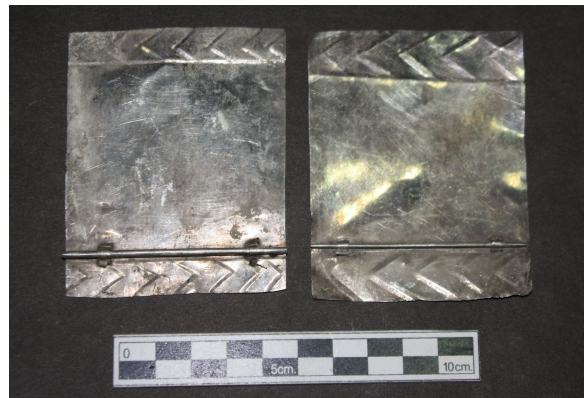


Figure 16: Two rectangular silver brooches with sliding pins.

*Silver Beads:* Two silver thimble-shaped beads and a larger conical bead were found on Cerro Ilucán (Figure 17). All three of these objects contain pairs of thread holes on two facing sides. Excavations at the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa revealed a silver circular pectoral beside which was a necklace made with thimble-shaped beads (Figure 18).



Figure 17: Two silver thimble-shaped beads and a larger conical bead.



Figure 18: A necklace of thimble-shaped silver beads from the Wari site of Espiritu Pampa (Ministry of Culture, photograph by Javier Flores Santa Cruz, artifact number EP 2010-83).

*Drinking Vessel:* One silver drinking vessel with embossed circles surrounding its exterior rim is in the collection (Figure 19). The bottom of the vessel has been damaged. Although drinking vessels are frequently found within elite Moche and Chimú burials on the coast of Peru, none match the designs on this artifact. Nevertheless, its embossed circles are similar to those found on Wari circular pectorals which will be discussed below.



Figure 19: A silver drinking vessel with embossed circles around its rim.

*Rectangular silver plaque:* The looters also found one rectangular silver plaque. It measures about 30 centimeters long and 15 centimeters high and contains a series of thread holes along its upper edge and a line of more decorative holes along its lower edge (Figure 20). It also contains two human faces, each wearing a hat, in high relief. Both individuals appear to be wearing earspools, indicators of high rank. The left head contains oval eyes, a distinct nose, a stern mouth, and smooth headgear (Figure 21). The right head displays similar facial features, but wears headgear decorated with a row of rectangular sequins (Figure 21). This figure corresponds to an individual that Knobloch (2012, 2018) calls Agent 103 that has been identified on other Wari artifacts, including a ceramic vessel at Espiritu Pampa (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:103). The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston contains two gold rectangular plaques displaying hat-wearing human faces in high relief (Figure 22). Each plaque measures about 13 centimeters by 10 centimeters and they appear to show the same individual, who, from his headgear, is different from the two individuals shown on the Cerro Ilucán plaque. Nevertheless, the similarities



between the gold and silver plaques are remarkable.



Figure 20: A rectangular plaque recovered on the summit of Cerro Ilucán.



Figure 21: The two raised faces on a rectangular silver plaque from Cerro Ilucán.



Figure 22: Two gold plaques with raised faces. Unlike the silver plaque from Cerro Ilucán, these two objects appear to be showing the same individual (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., left, Accession Number 2010.837 2 [13.2 x 10.6 x 3.7centimeters] and right, Accession Number 2010.837 1 [12.6 by 10.3 by 4.1 centimeters]).

*Circular silver pectoral:* Perhaps the most intriguing artifact contained within the Cerro Ilucán collection is a circular pectoral (Figure 23). The border of the pectoral contains a single row of embossed circles. The center of the disk is marked by two concentric circles between which eight embossed circles orbit. The area between the border and the concentric inner circles is decorated by a meandering line design. Various other circular pectorals with meandering line and petal designs have been found across the Andes at Wari sites (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:178–184; Bauer and Fonseca 2024). For example, six, or more likely eight, have been found in separate burials at the site of Espíritu Pampa. Others have been found at the Cordillera de Colan (Bagua Grande) in the far north of Peru, at the site of Kullupata (Cusco), and near the town of Santa Rosa in the Apurímac River Valley (Ayacucho). Another example is held in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú. We also know of two shell and gold ornaments held in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, showing individuals wearing circular disks and a small stone figurine wearing a meandering line design pectoral held in the Museo Larco (Figure 24).



Figure 23: A silver pectoral with a meandering line design from Cerro Ilucán is similar to other circular pectorals found at other sites in the Wari realm.



Figure 24: A stone figurine, said to be from the Cusco area, wearing a circular pectoral with a meandering line design (artifact number Museo Larco; ML301403, height, 6.7 centimeters).

## Dating the Cerro Ilucán Collection

Although the Cerro Ilucán artifacts come from a looted context, similar objects recovered elsewhere in the Andes can be used to provide general dates for the collection. Most importantly for dating, the Cerro Ilucán collection contains a silver circular pectoral. At least six similar pectorals have been recovered from separate burials at the site of Espíritu Pampa. Carbon from two burials that contained similar pectorals returned calibrated AMS mean dates of AD 699±22 (Sample AA106771; AD 677–863; 95.4 percent confidence level) and AD 686±28 (Sample AA 106770; AD 666–861; 95.4 percent confidence level). Carbon recovered from another burial which contained a poorly preserved, likely silver pectoral, yielded a calibrated AMS date of AD 711±25 (Sample AA106769; AD 686–875; 95.4 percent confidence level).<sup>2</sup> These three dates are remarkably similar, clustering around AD 700, and place the production of silver pectorals, like that found at Cerro Ilucán, squarely within the time associated with Wari expansion across the Andes.

## Discussion

While examples of most of the objects recovered from Cerro Ilucán have not been found at other Wari sites, three artifacts stand out as important exceptions. The first two are gold plaques with human faces that are held in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Unfortunately, the provenance of these gold objects is not known, other than they were formerly owned by the collector John C. Wise as early as 1968.

<sup>2</sup> The calibrations for these three dates were done with Calib 8.2 (Hogg *et al.* 2020; Stuiver and Reimer 1993). Samples AA106770 and AA106771 were previously reported in Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer (2020:14–15) using a different calibration.



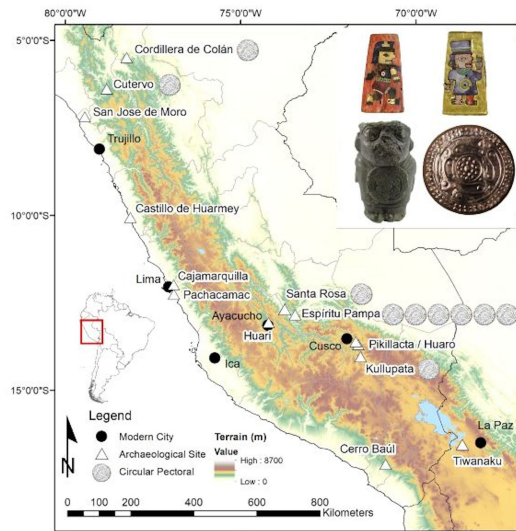


Figure 25: Distribution of silver circular pectorals. Ten have been found at known locations, while one (upper right) is unprovenienced and held in a museum collection. Three unprovenienced depictions of a person wearing a pectoral (upper right) are also held in museum collections (map by David Reid).

The second class of artifacts found at Cerro Ilucán and elsewhere in the Andean highlands are silver, circular pectorals (Figure 25). At least fourteen of these pectorals, or images of them, have been found in the Andes; ten are associated with specific sites, while four are held in museum collections. The borders of the pectorals contain one or two rows of embossed circles while their more central areas are covered with a meandering line or a petal design. Similar embossed circles are displayed on the Cerro Ilucán drinking vessel, suggesting the cup and the pectoral may have been linked.

Elsewhere I suggest that the individuals who wore these well-crafted pectorals held high social positions among the Wari (Bauer and Fonseca Santa Cruz 2024; Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:178–184). The uniformity of the pectoral designs, and their recovery at various sites, speak to the institutionalization of

Wari authority in those who wore them. Several of the silver circular pectorals at Espiritu Pampa appear to have been interred with adults, although bone preservation is extremely poor at the site. In contrast, several of the objects contained within the Cerro Ilucán collection, especially the sandals, and perhaps the miniature weapons, may, but not necessarily (Hamilton 2018), make references to a child. If this is correct, then the association of the silver circular pectoral, as an emblem of authority, and a child, may reflect an inherited social position among the Wari elite.

### Acknowledgments

I thank the Town Council of Cutervo for giving me access to the Cerro Ilucán collection, as well as the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Museo Larco, and Javier Flores Santa Cruz for permission to reproduce their photographs. I also thank Monica Barnes and David Reid for their comments on the final version of this report.

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