

Possible uses, roles and meanings  
of Chavín-style painted textiles  
of South Coast Peru

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Nearly two hundred textiles painted in a style closely related to the sculptures at Chavín de Huantar have been found over 500 kilometers from that site, on the South Coast of Peru. The likely provenance for these elaborately-decorated fragments (Fig. 1) is the Callango Valley. Burials at the site of Karwa (Carhua) in particular have been suggested (Cordy-Collins 1976:43).<sup>1</sup> These cloths provide a source of largely un-mined information on the complex character of the Early Horizon in Peru. Their physical iconographic and formal properties shed light on regional interaction, ritual practice, religious expression and the role of art in early Peru.



Fig. 1. Painted South Coast textile depicting a female figure with vegetal staffs.

The internal evidence of the textiles, both the fabric and its decoration, is treated as direct information on the period. Though encoded, this evidence gives clues as to possible uses, roles and meanings of the painted cloth and textiles in general. While this approach avoids the difficult archaeological questions that again

surround the concept of the "Chavín Empire," close study of the textiles themselves reveals complexity analogous to that being discovered in the field. The technical, religious and artistic considerations manifest in the painted South Coast pieces reflect larger cultural and religious issues.

#### PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Consideration of the physical and technical attributes of the textiles may help to determine their place(s) of manufacture as well as their possible pre-burial use(s). In the attempt to pinpoint location of manufacture, evidence is found in construction sequence and the yarn and base cloth characteristics. The forms taken by the finished products suggest their uses. It is probable that these cloths were not made solely for burial, but rather performed many functions before placement in the grave. Just as the nets interred with fishermen and looms with weavers were utilized as tools before death, so the buried cloths probably functioned in other roles during life.

The construction sequence can be inferred from close observation of the finished works. Strips of cotton cloth, averaging around seventeen inches in width, were seamed together to make larger square or rectangular pieces (Fig. 2). These were painted with dyes after assembly, given that the seam threads are colored and the patterns extend uninterrupted over the different strips. This two-part construction allows for a division of cloth production from cloth decoration; different locations for the various stages are possible. The characteristics of the base cloth and its coloration order also suggest this possibility.

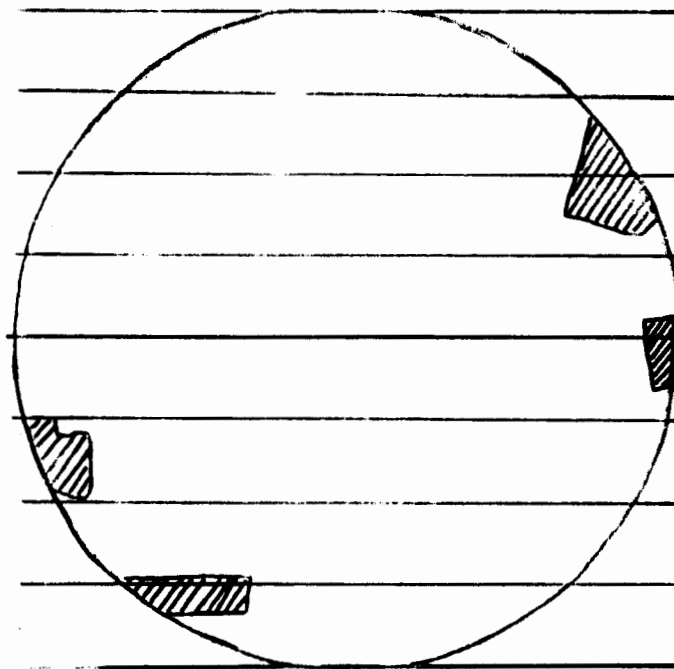


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of a 9 by 13 foot painted Chavin-style textile with a circular composition constructed in seamed cloth strips.

The base cloth displays several characteristics of North Coast and Central Coast textiles, although found on the South Coast. The "Karwa" textiles were plain-woven, with single warps and wefts or with one element paired and the other single (Fig. 3). Direction of yarn twist while spinning is diagnostic of place of manufacture in ancient Peru. In an extensive study of plain-weaves, Dwight Wallace reports that many of the South Coast examples were made with yarn twisted in a counter-clockwise direction ("S" spun) that is characteristic of North Coast weaving (Wallace 1975; 1979:32). Other "Karwa" pieces were formed with yarns both "S" and "Z" (clockwise spun). "Z"-spinning is considered diagnostic of the South Coast, while a combination of "S" and "Z" spinning may indicate Central Coast production. Thus, Karwa cloths display either a foreign or an intermediate pattern of yarn conformation. Other foreign, i.e. North Coast, attributes include: single-ply warps, paired wefts, close

ratio of warp to weft, and multiple bobbin weaving. Wallace suggests importation of the South Coast cloths from elsewhere, either the North or Central Coasts (Wallace 1979:48). Thus, they could have been woven and seamed outside the South Coast, then decorated subsequently.

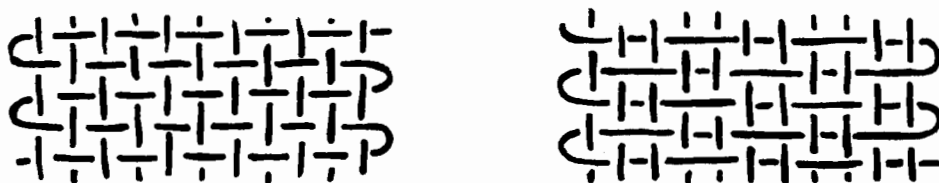


Fig. 3. Plain-weave technique using either single warps and wefts or one paired element in semi-basket weave.

Coloration also took place in several stages: first negative, or "resist," techniques, then positive, or "direct," painting were used. Often three different methods of painting were employed. This reinforces the picture of ancient Peruvian textile virtuosity; the Pre-Columbian weaver and dyer left no method unexplored. In fact, the use of batik (painted paste resist) on these South Coast pieces may lengthen the list of revolutionary weaving inventions of the Early Horizon proposed by William Conklin (Conklin 1978).

Both batik and plangi (tie-dye) were exploited to create patterns in paste-covered or tied-off portions of the base cloth (Fig. 4). These resist areas preserved the original white cloth from the brown dyebath into which the entire piece was then immersed. The white circles with slightly uneven edges characterize plangi, while the painted shape with hard edges distinguishes batik. It is important to note that these negative techniques entail an inversion of the normal painting process; what is painted (or tied) is where color does not appear. This reversal at the technical level characterizes the iconographic, formal, and by implication, the

conceptual levels at work in the Karwa textiles.

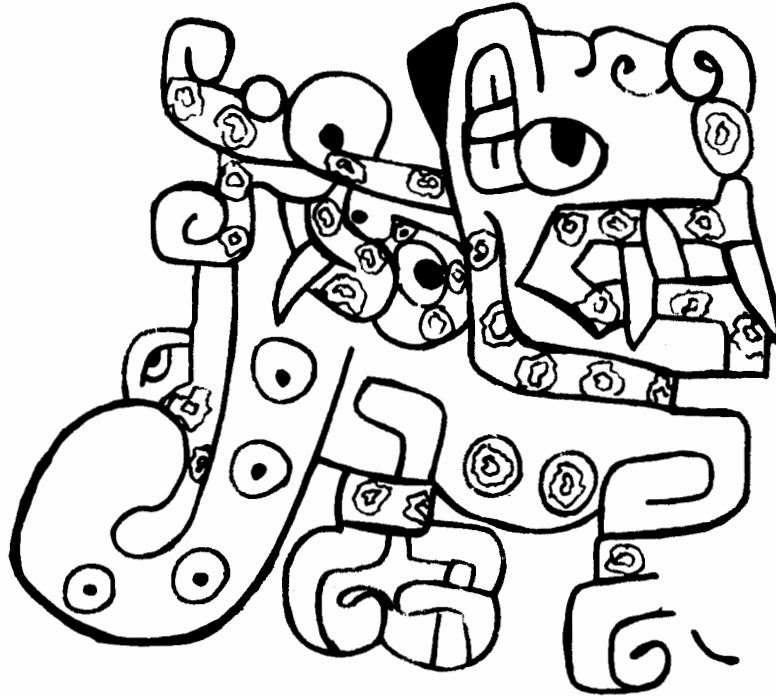


Fig. 4. Jaguar-patterned cloth showing plangi circles, batik areas and directly painted lines.

Following these resist processes, dye was painted directly on the cloth surface. Incorporating the white patterns made by the batik and plangi processes, areas of red, yellow, brown and sometimes olive green were added. The dark brown outlines, or contour lines, were painted on last. The negative and positive dyeing techniques "interlock" to suggest prior overall design planning; the patterns created through negative dyeing were placed in relation to the anticipated positive painted areas. For example, the jaguar spots were tied and dyed before the animal's body was delineated in Fig. 4. This represents a developed skill of pre-visualization on the part of the artist and a level of inverted

conceptualization higher than that implicit in the negative dyeing techniques themselves.

Besides indicating complex pre-visualization, this two-part "blind" coloration could imply the use of templates. A cut-out of the entire figure easily determines the placement of the various design elements regardless of technique to be employed. Alana Cordy-Collins and Peter Roe both have suggested templates to explain the similarity of repeated figures within, if not between, cloths (Cordy-Collins 1976:48; Roe 1974:7-8). There are several arguments in favor of the template hypothesis as well as certain important qualifications.

In addition to the interlocking of the dye techniques, the symmetry of the frontal figures argues in favor of the template hypothesis (Fig. 10). It seems probable that the more sacred figures, as indicated by their frontality and staffs, would have merited greater control over their representation. Therefore, it would be more likely that a pattern of some kind be used to insure a perfect and symmetrical composition. As before, this implies inversion in conceptualization: in making a full template, the material would be folded and half the final design cut out, and in using a half-template flipping would reconstruct the entire design. In either case halving and doubling are used to produce a single image. Template use with an even more complicated process of inversion is described by Cordy-Collins as a "twisted splayed" motif. One face is repeated upsidedown and backwards in relation to another (Cordy-Collins 1976:245).

Arguing against the use of templates are certain cases in which there is no absolute symmetry within a figure or no complete

similarity between figures in one piece. Cordy-Collins admits that Chavín art is not always concerned with true mirror-imagery, but rather with harmoniously balanced designs (Cordy-Collins 1976:9). Roe finds the two sides of many figures are "nearly alike" or two figures are "nearly identical" (Roe 1974:7-8). Less evidence of templates is evident in looser compositions, filler elements and non-frontal figures (Fig. 5). Because repetition is favored in Chavín art in general, artists would probably have developed skills in creating nearly identical repetitions of an element. In these ways, the template hypothesis becomes a didactic crutch that can denigrate Chavín artistic virtuosity. Thus, it is suggested that pre-visualization of designs, incorporating inversion as a guiding principle, is predominant in the South Coast textile compositions while only limited, prescribed use of templates is indicated.



Fig. 5. Painted textile with loose composition of plants and animals, showing no use of a template.

Physical evidence again comes into play to hypothesize about the pre-burial uses of the painted textiles. Firstly, single-ply, unevenly-spun warp threads are found in most of the cloths. Since the warp is the tension-bearing element, hence usually made stronger

than the weft, most of this fabric is unsuitable for garments (which take greater stress than hangings and coverings). The large size of these pieces is another indication that many were used as hangings. Reconstructions range from several feet across to nine by thirteen feet (Fig. 2); size alone bespeaks a function as large-scale decoration. In addition, Conklin points out that the fragile fabric and non-fast dyes, especially susceptible to fading in sunlight, makes it unlikely these were hung outside (Conklin 1978:3). Thus, the wall-sized hangings may have been used as portable, ritual decorations within structures. Cordy-Collins notes that one textile (Cordy-Collins 1976:Fig. 118) closely echoes the arrangement of the circular sunken courtyard and its encircling jaguar frieze at Chavín de Huantar. While the textile is not a direct reference or illustration of the courtyard, considering that the jaguars face rather than follow each other, it suggests a similar intention: to delineate a ritual space with a circular composition of jaguars. If the linkage between the site and the textile is valid, the latter created the ritual spaces of the former in two dimensions.

Many other types of cloths appear in addition to wall-hangings: fringed coverings, plus what may be belts or ties and a canopy. A high-quality, fringed cloth smaller than the hangings is seen in Fig. 6. There fringe is added at the sides of the representation--or rather its principal orientation--while another example is fringed above and below the figure (Lyon 1974, Plate 30). If the fringe is presumed to hang downwards rather than over the cloth in both cases, they probably functioned as covering for flat surfaces. In this position, the fringe would not obscure the depiction which could be



seen from many directions, including "upright." This positioning is consistent with the multi-directional character of Chavín-style art, within which one view predominates.

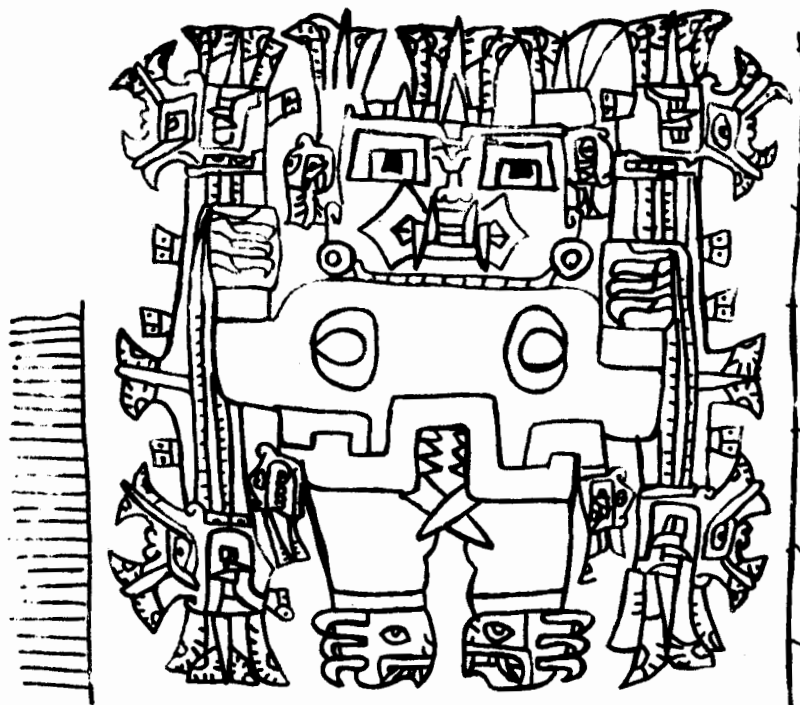


Fig. 6. Representation of a female staff-bearing figure on a fringed cloth.

Another form of the painted South Coast textile appears as a long, thin strip (Fig. 7). Measuring 35 inches long in fragmentary form and around 5 inches wide with both selvages, this may have been worn as a belt or tie. The construction suits this piece for wear: the plain-weave is tightly constructed in S-spun, Z-ply cotton threads. Some circumstantial evidence for this attribution as a belt comes from belts prominently worn by figures in Chavín sculpture and in the painted textiles themselves (Fig. 7). Belts with an analogous meander-type pattern are found on the Lanzón, the Raimondi and various processional figures at Chavín de Huanter as well as

staff-bearers on the "Karwa" textiles. The actual belts were not washable, so would have been worn as ceremonial items (as suggested by the ritually important characters on which belts are represented).

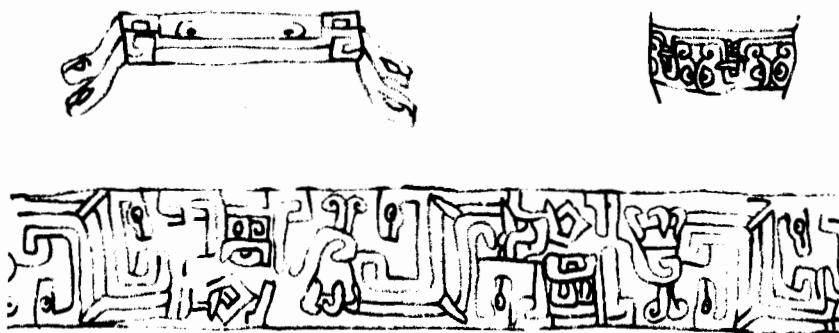


Fig. 7. Painted South Coast cloth belt or tie (below) compared with belts worn by the Raimondi (top left) and Lanzón (top right) figures.

A unique complete piece suggests another ritual use (Fig. 8). Measuring seventeen by nineteen inches with all four selvages intact, this cloth has the same strong construction as the belts. Two webs were sewn together and the heading cords, or extra wefts at the selvages, were braided at the eight corners thus formed. These heading cord braids created strings at the corners and two sides by which the textile could have been mounted or stretched (Bird and Conklin 1970: Fig.9). However, the bird iconography further implies suspension as a canopy or ceiling hanging, by analogy with the overhead bird cornice at Chavín de Huantar. Whether or not the piece was a canopy, its form indicates a different function than the hangings, covers and belts.<sup>2</sup>

As ritual coverings for walls, objects, people and ceilings, painted fabrics created a total environment. Cloths complemented the extensive corpus of Chavín ritual paraphernalia such as mortars,

snuffers, trays, shells and vessels. Yet this ceremonial role has been passed over in the literature. Cordy-Collins subtitled her dissertation on the iconography of the textiles "The Discovery of a Pre-Columbian Catechism," thereby calling the corpus a manual of religious instruction. Given the various forms taken by the pieces, this overt religious education role seems secondary to the ceremonial functions through which indirect instruction could have taken place. The use of the term "catechism" unfortunately implies a set of Post-Conquest, Christian assumptions about religion not necessarily applicable to the Chavin case, still poorly understood at present. Some brief iconographical observations about the painted staff-bearing figures may shed further light on some unique qualities of this Pre-Columbian religion and its regional expression.

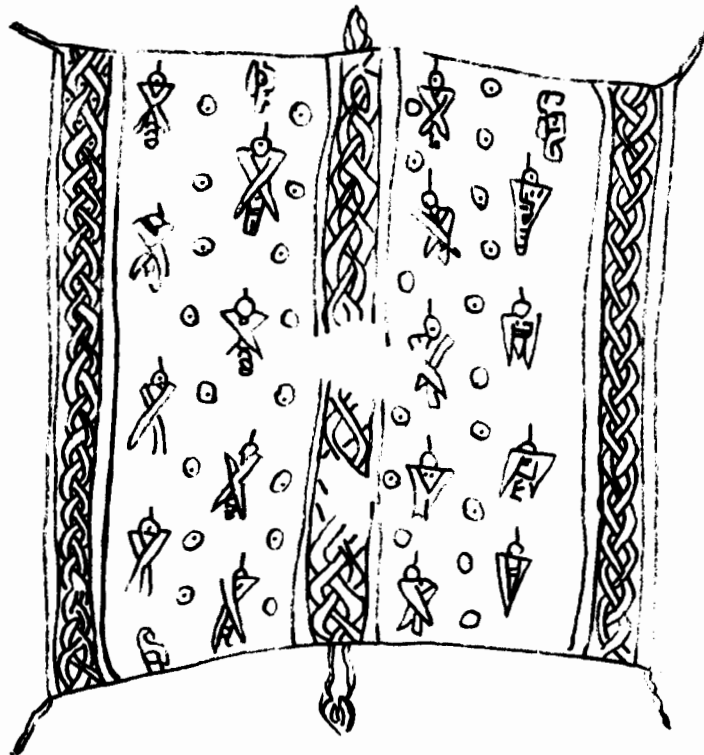


Fig. 8 Possibly canopy or ceiling hanging measuring approximately 17 by 19 inches.

## ICONOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

An Iconographic Study of Chavín Textiles from the South Coast of Peru: The Discovery of a Pre-Columbian Catechism remains the most valuable compendium of Chavin painted textile iconography. Yet, like all pioneering works, it now bears re-evaluation and further analysis of the data. Cordy-Collins stressed similarities over differences in her attempt to categorize the diverse images and relate them to other Chavín-style media. For example, all frontal staff-bearers were grouped together regardless of staff type and other features.<sup>3</sup> However, differences in manner of representation, such as a disembodied or abstracted version of a figure, were considered separately. The generalized definition of Chavín art was applied despite greater complexity in the images.<sup>4</sup> Finally, several iconographic elements and emphases appear unique to the medium, although Cordy-Collins concludes that only the "Cotton Goddess" is idiosyncratic (Cordy-Collins 1976:267).

Generally speaking, the painted textiles display iconographic themes found at Chavín de Huantar: staff-bearer, jaguar, harpy eagle, cayman, processional human figures, trophy-head-bearer, monkey, and San Pedro cactus. Yet direct comparison of a textile representation with its stone or gold "counterpart" reveals a great number of fundamental differences not explained fully by the demands of the various media. For example, the sculpted trophy-head-bearer is a simple human figure in a procession showing no metaphoric substitutions of mouths for joints (Fig. 9).<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the painted examples are seen as a group of barely humanoid figures scattered across the cloth, their bodies shown as fanged faces and

their square heads highly abstracted. Thus, surface similarity yields to variation in conception, attributes and style of representation.



Fig. 9. Comparison of Chavin de Huantar stone trophy-head bearer (top) with South Coast textile representation of the same subject (bottom).



The greater emphases on the staff bearer and on snakes throughout the textile corpus contrasts with those on the feline and bird in Chavín sculpture. There are twenty-eight staff figures in Cordy-Collins' sample, making them the largest single iconographic unit. (Snakes appear as staffs, belts and hats on these figures.) Because the staff-bearer forms the largest subgroup, finer iconographical characterization is possible. Staff-bearers can be subdivided consistently by gender and staff type as well as by body

position. These new categories allow for the identification of figures in extremely fragmentary pieces. They also betray different roles and a possible status hierarchy within the South Coast Chavín-related religion.

Gender includes female, male and neuter categories (Figs. 6,10-13). Patricia Lyon suggests a useful methodology for determination of gender in her "Female Supernaturals in Ancient Peru":

If some figures are depicted with genitals while others in the same style are not, it is sometimes possible to establish regularities of dress or adornment, such as hair-do, on the former which may then be used to identify the latter. One might also find other iconographic features such as certain plants, animals or abstract symbols consistently associated with one or the other sex. (Lyon 1978:96).

Following this method, definite iconographic constellations differentiate the three gender categories.

Female figures often display readily recognizable metaphoric substitutions for primary and secondary sexual attributes: a toothed mouth stands for the "vagina dentata" while eyes stand for breasts (Figs. 6,10).<sup>6</sup> These gendered females are shown in a frontal position and hold vegetalized staffs in either hand. Besides the consistent frontality and plant features, these females can be inverted to reveal a second fanged face made up of headdress and face elements from the upright image (Fig. 15). This invertibility is familiar from the primary cult image, the Raimondi stela. By extension, these frontal females are highly venerated and probably supernatural. Many types of vegetalized staffs appear, some with leafy fanged animals or snakes, some with cotton and other specific plants. One female holds twisted grasses or fibers that may represent the primordial technique

of twining. It is tempting to identify the circle above her right "staff" as the moon, archetypally associated with females and their textile arts. Thus, varied roles relating to Nature and textiles are indicated for the frontal, invertible female staff-bearers. With this constellation of features, fragmentary images such as Fig. 1 may be assigned to the female gender.<sup>7</sup>

Fig. 10. Female figure perhaps representing the primordial textile technique of twining.



Males display a complex of attributes opposite from those of females: they appear in profile carrying fanged-animal staffs (Figs. 11-12). Male genitalia is metaphorically substituted by a triangle, representing a schematic penis or loincloth.<sup>8</sup> They often wear a snake belt and can be found in cartouche arrangements (Fig. 11). Because they are profile representations, they are not invertible and so may play a more human or subsidiary role in comparison to the females. Males' consistent identification with animal staffs makes it possible to assign Fig. 12 to the male category.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 11. Typical male profile figure carrying fanged-animal staffs.



Fig. 12. Fragmentary staff, probably from male figure.

Females and males constitute two small, opposing subgroups; however, the majority of the Chavín-style textile staff-bearers are genderless. These neuters display a unique quality: with only two exceptions, all carry snakes and some wear triangular snake hats (Fig. 13). Neuters also show some intermediate characteristics in that both profile and frontal figures are found, although profiles predominate. In addition, the exceptions to the snake-staff rule are frontal and semi-invertible, similar to the females.<sup>10</sup>



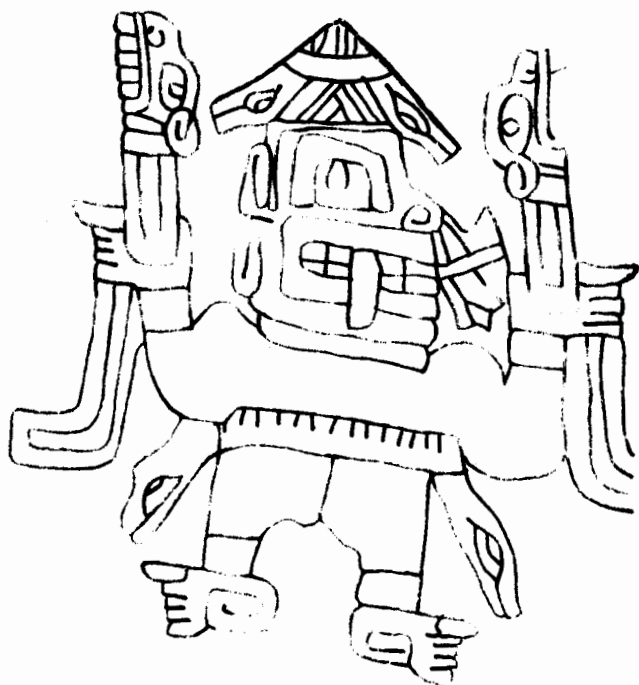


Fig. 13. Typical neuter profile figure carrying snake "staves" and wearing a triangular snake hat.

Thus, neuters form a bridge between female and male. This, plus their numerical predominance, calls into question the centrality of depicting gender in Chavín-style art and religion. It appears that only when sex was a vital descriptive aspect of the figures was it delineated metaphorically, while much of the time it was ignored as extraneous information. Rather, it is larger iconographic constellations such as plant-bearing frontal female, animal-bearing profile male and snake-bearing neuter that characterize the textile figures. Lyon's theory proves highly applicable and the South Coast textile iconography betrays deeper levels of religious complexity and organization at work.<sup>11</sup>

#### FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS

This intricate iconographic system is, of necessity, revealed through the forms in art. As at the technical level, questions of reversal and visualization characterize the formal level. The manipulation of line especially embodies the broader communicative

concerns of the "Chavín" religion by making possible the inversion of important personages. Inversion represents an ingenious solution to the problems of depicting the concepts of duality, paradox and transcendence. This visual device encodes meaning through the perceptual effects of multiple axes and "contour rivalry."

Multiple visual axes are found in the mythical representations of Chavín-style art. For example, the south column bird on the Black-and-White portal at Chavín de Huantar has ten angles along which upright faces can be seen. This gives the viewer a sense of dizzying circular movement while trying to orient the various images within the primary one. As one figure is actually many, depending quite literally on the point of view, these axes communicate the difficult concept of multiplicity within unity. The lack of one consistent orientation runs counter to human, gravity-dependent perception of the world. Thus, multiple axes also depict a supernatural environment in which earthly rules do not apply.

"Contour rivalry," as described in the perceptual psychology theory of Rudolf Arnheim, allows for complete inversion along axes (cf. Arnheim 1974:223-224). Contour rivalry denotes the sharing of outlines by two wholes and the subsequent creation of visual paradox (Fig. 14). Arnheim describes the situation:

The sharing of borders is uncomfortable, and the hexagons [Fig. 14] exhibit an urge to pull apart, since each figure has a simple, independent shape of its own ... Everyone is familiar with the goblet whose outlines can be seen alternatively as two profile faces confronting each other. When one sees the goblet, the outlines look so completely different from those of the faces that the identity can only be understood intellectually, not acknowledged visually, nor can the two versions be seen at the same time. (Arnheim 1974:223-225).

These conditions apply to the contour rivalry seen in the female supernatural figures (Figs. 1,15). Both the "upright" and the "upside-down" versions claim certain lines: when inverted the wrinkled brow of Fig. 1 turns into the nose of Fig. 15, the pupils move from upper to lower lid and the headdress spikes of the former become the teeth of the latter. The standing and the descending creatures coexist in one body by sharing such contours. This represents a supreme depiction of the difficult concept of duality, or "two in one."

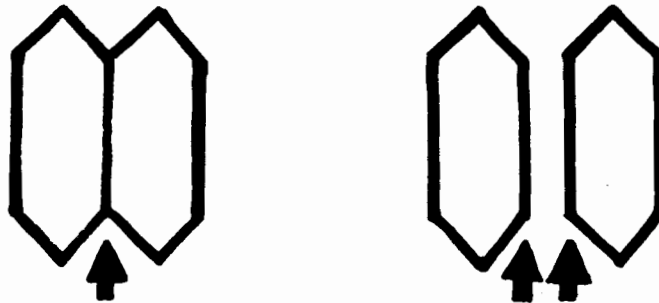


Fig. 14. Visual tension inherent in shared line or "contour rivalry" (left) is resolved as simpler, separated elements (right) under certain perceptual circumstances.

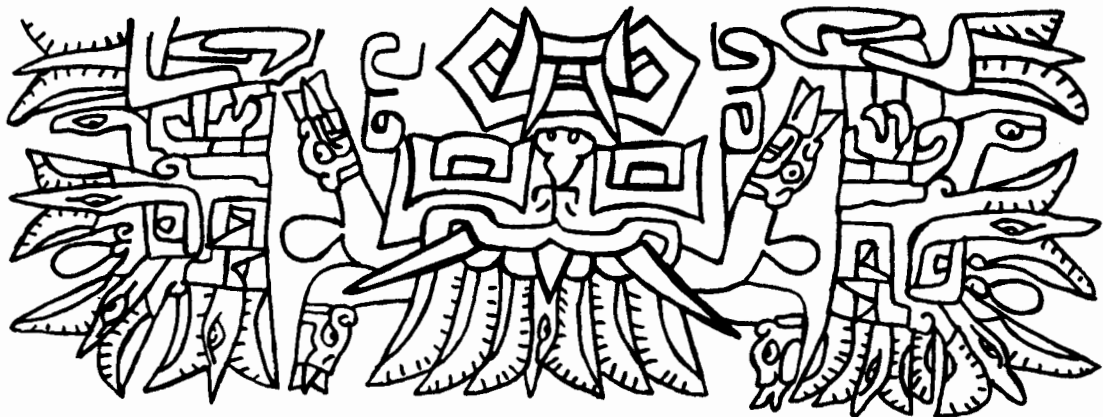


Fig. 15. Inverted view of Fig. 1 showing duality encoded through "contour rivalry."

These dual entities can be separated visually under special circumstances. In perceptual experiments "when the control of the stimulus over the organizing forces in the brain is weakened-- for example, by the exposure of dim figures for a split second-- ... sometimes [there is] a tendency to give each unit its own contour" (Arnheim 1974:224). In other words, the shared line can be seen twice so as to make both wholes complete and separate. Chavín altered perception through drug-induced hallucinations or religious trance could weaken normal mental organization and allow both aspects to be perceived.<sup>12</sup> Even without external aids, religious training and visual familiarity would make it possible to tease apart dual images with relative ease. This perceptual trickery "shocks the observer out of ... complacent trust of reality" (Arnheim 1974:227). Like multiple axes, contour rivalry inhabits an impossible, and therefore non-human, world. Thus, the concepts of paradox and transcendence are visually portrayed, along with duality, through formal manipulation.

Physically, textiles are an ideal form in which to convey the principle of inversion through multiple axes and contour rivalry. In general, fabric is eminently portable and thus suitable for large-scale dissemination of ideas. (The non-local characteristics of the "Karwa" cloth show that some movement took place.) In specific, its flexibility allows for actual inversion of the principle image in order to display the "hidden" one. A complex, confusing representation resolves itself into component figures when flipped over. Small cloths could be handled, fringed ones circumnavigated and belts are seen from above by the wearer.

Wall hangings, and the sculpture at Chavin de Huantar, are immovable but still demonstrate their message to the trained, possessed or intoxicated. Thus, in a broad sense, textiles are suited to religious education and ritual expression in physical, iconographic and formal aspects.

The South Coast Chavín-style cloths are a regional interpretation of a religion concerned with communicating duality, paradox and transcendence through art. Inversion and pre-visualization characterize these works of art from creation through observation. Analysis of their internal evidence helps paint a more complete picture of this revolutionary period.<sup>13</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Karwa was suggested as the provenance for these textiles by looters and second-hand accounts and so remains speculative (Cordy-Collins 1976:43).
2. Other ritual garments such as capes are represented in the Chavín de Huantar sculptural record (Sharon and Donnan 1977: 377); however, the corresponding actual textiles have not been distinguished as yet.
3. Cordy-Collins observes at one point that frontal staff "gods" "hold unique staffs" (1976:81). She follows this up for the "Cotton Goddess" (1979).
4. For example, treatment of the question of fangs disregards the evidence that several placements were possible especially in profile views (for example, Cordy-Collins 1976:121).
5. Rather than employing John Rowe's more familiar term "kenning" (Rowe 1962:15-17), I am adopting George Kubler's "metaphoric substitution," in order to avoid the literary analogy implicit in the former (Kubler, personal communication).
6. The "North" figure on the Black-and-White Portal at Chavin de Huantar is the prototype for this delineated gender (See Lyon, 1978).

7. Females can be seen in Cordy-Collins 1976: Figs. 47a,48,49,55; 1979: Fig. 2; Rowe 1962: Fig. 29; Lyon 1974: Plate 30, Fig. 8.
8. Male genitalia is seen most clearly on the "South" figure of the Black-and-White Portal at Chavín de Huantar. It is interesting to note that eyes again stand for secondary sexual characteristics; here they substitute for testicles.
9. Males can be seen in Cordy-Collins 1976: Figs. 5,26,58,60,67; Roe 1974: Fig. 16.
10. Neuter exceptions are seen in Corday-Collins 1976: Figs. 15, 52a. Neuters can be seen in Cordy-Collins 1976: Figs. 16,23,24, 42,46a,46b,54,57,66; Roe 1974: Figs. 13,17.
11. Since the various staff figures fall into discernible subdivisions and a possible hierarchy of roles, it would be useful to differentiate between them more effectively in our terminology. Though cumbersome, terms like "Female plant-bearing supernatural" are precise and avoid the inevitable imposition of Western religious ideas that terms such as god or goddess carry with them. These specific, descriptive categories do justice to the complexity of the expression by recognizing the different roles of celebrant and celebrated.
12. Chavín use of hallucinogenic drugs is strongly suggested (Sharon and Donnan 1977; Cordy-Collins 1980).
13. My thanks to Barbara Conklin, William Conklin, George Kubler, Michael Coe and Richard Burger for their kind assistance in this project.

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