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Paul, Anne, "The Multiple Layers of Meaning in a Paracas Necropolis Textile" (2000). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 827.

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## **The Multiple Layers of Meaning in a Paracas Necrópolis Textile**

Anne Paul

EP 1986, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

The focus of this article is a quite small, very old, structurally simple poncho that is the repository of multiple meanings and messages (Figures 1 and 2). It was made by weavers affiliated with the Paracas/Topará cultural tradition of south coastal Peru, probably buried during Early Intermediate Period 1 (ca. 0 – 100 AD) in a cemetery called the Necrópolis de Wari Kayan on the Paracas Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of this weaving is based on the interpretative results of several previous studies, each of which uses a large sample of Paracas Necrópolis-style textiles. Here, my aim is to show how several different aspects of iconography and design may have operated within a single garment.

The camelid fiber plain weave poncho measures 49 cm by 57.8 cm (not including the fringe sleeves) and has a vertical neck slit. When worn it would have covered only the upper torso, with the ends of the side fringes touching the elbows. Anthropomorphic figures embroidered in stem stitch appear against a solid color background in borders and in the field. This iconographic type, which is present on several dozen different Paracas Necrópolis embroideries, has been interpreted in one study as an ecstatic shaman (Paul and Turpin 1986). It is characterized by a human body arched backwards, a head with unbound hair thrown back, and arms that stretch to the sides; the nude torso often has skeletonized ribs. This cluster of attributes, accompanied by specific accessories such as the fan and pectoral present in the poncho depictions, set the motif apart from other Paracas Necrópolis themes, and are the key traits that portray the sacred ecstatic condition of the shaman during his voyage to the lands of the spirits and of the dead. An alternative, slightly different, interpretation, proposes that the figures represent not the religious specialist himself but rather the spirit of a returning ancestor summoned during priestly séances (Frank Salomon, personal communication 1986, quoted in Paul forthcoming a). In either case, the garments on which the figure appears were likely worn by the high-ranking members of Paracas/Topará society, those men who were buried in the large funerary bundles that contained weavings such as this poncho. One of the important functions of such a person would have been to mediate between man and the supernatural forces that influence and determine events in life. Hence, the poncho embellished with shaman figures may have served as a badge of office, marking the special relationship of the wearer to the supernatural.

The garment has two L-shaped borders embroidered on the ground cloth around the exterior edges, as well as one around the neck slit. Two spaces of ground cloth are left uncovered on the sides, a design feature present on nearly all of the 163 Paracas Necrópolis ponchos examined in another study (see Paul 2000a: 104). The gaps are usually quite obvious, but they can also be so narrow as to be almost invisible (they measure only three mm on one poncho!; *ibid.*: fig. 4). Within the Paracas/Topará cultural

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<sup>1</sup> The poncho (accession number 1958.292) is in the collections of The Art Institute of Chicago, its exact provenience unknown. It very likely originated from one of the Necrópolis burial bundles.

tradition, as it is known to us through the contents of the burial bundles excavated from the Necrópolis de Wari Kayan, ponchos were produced for well over 200 years, from Early Horizon 10B until the end of Early Intermediate Period 2 (ca. 50 BC – 200 AD). The border format described here appears during that entire time period; since this particular configuration is of such long duration it is likely that the arrangement itself carries symbolic content. In particular, I think that it could be an abstract image of a segment of two twisting strands (Figure 3). As noted elsewhere,

there is a tantalizing visual similarity between the images of twisted strands on some Early Horizon 9 Paracas Ocucaje looped tunics and the border format of Necrópolis ponchos...<sup>2</sup> At the point in the looped imagery where one strand passes over another strand of the same color, the notion of depth – of one strand being in front of the other – is effected by a break in the body of the underlying strand. Without this convention it would not be possible to say with certainty that the two identically-colored strands twist around each other. A segment of the angularized twisted S or Z strands in the looped tunic... prefigures the border format of Paracas Necrópolis ponchos..., with the 'breaking points' of the underlying strands equivalent to the gaps in the poncho border formats. (Paul 2000a: 107)

When these spaces are in the upper left/lower right corners, as in the poncho examined here, they replicate the image of S strands (the yarns employed in the fabrication of Paracas Necrópolis textiles are normally Z spun and S plied). A second level of iconography on this garment, then, is a reference, embedded in the disposition of the pair of exterior borders, to two twisting strands.

The act of spinning was obviously of paramount importance in a culture that produced so much yarn for weaving and embroidering. To produce an S twist yarn, the weaver spins clockwise; spinning in the opposite direction produces a Z twist yarn. An interest in such directional issues may be present in the orientation of figures in the borders. For easier "reading", the depictions of shamans in the diagram in Figure 2 are represented by arrows in which the shaft corresponds to the axis of the lower torso and legs, and the crook to the direction in which the head is thrown back. All border figures are placed parallel to the edges of the cloth, with the heads of those in the L-shaped borders pointing clockwise and those in the neck border pointing counterclockwise. The choice of directions is not fortuitous: 98 percent of the over 100 ponchos that have asymmetrical images repeating in glide reflection (the symmetry operation present in this poncho) position figures in the exterior borders so that the tops of their heads point in a clockwise direction (ibid.: 109). Furthermore, 83 percent of the images in the neck borders of these same garments are positioned in an opposite, counterclockwise direction, as in this poncho. These frequencies indicate that there was an intentional selection of either a clockwise or counterclockwise orientation of motifs, depending on whether the border was an exterior or interior one. As with border format, it seems conceivable that symbolic concerns underlie this aspect of design. Could it be that one aspect of figural orientation alludes to the imaginary circuits of spinning and plying?

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<sup>2</sup> M. Frame (1986: fig. 29) was the first to identify the images on the Ocucaje tunics as twisted strands. These garments predate the Necrópolis material and come from the Ica Valley.

Normally, a single iconographic type appears on a textile; when this motif is repeated along a straight line, as it is in borders, a band pattern results. Although there are seven different types of regular band patterns (see Washburn and Crowe 1988: 57-58 and fig. 2.26), each characterized by a particular motion of repetition, Paracas Necrópolis borders almost always employ either glide reflection or bifold rotation. For example, the figures in the borders of this garment repeat using glide reflection: looking at the left-hand side of the diagram in Figure 2, starting near the bottom of the border, we can imagine that as the arrow glides upwards, it reflects horizontally in a mirror. The motifs in over 97 percent of the borders in a sample of 543 textiles repeat using either this symmetry operation or bifold rotation (Paul forthcoming b). This fact is especially interesting in light of Washburn and Crowe's observation that:

symmetry classifications of bodies of data from ethnographic groups have revealed that cultural groups (i.e., interacting peoples who share a common life system) have preferential ways of arranging design elements. That is, rather than randomly using all seven one-dimensional classes and all seventeen two-dimensional classes and numerous of the infinite number of finite classes, a given cultural group will consistently use only several specific symmetries in their design system. (Washburn and Crowe 1988: 24)

A fundamental question raised by Washburn and Crowe's findings is "Why do people consistently prefer and choose certain ordering systems?" (ibid.: 29). Part of the answer for Paracas/Topará weavers undoubtedly lies in M. Frame's idea that the motions of symmetry used in the repetition of design units on many Andean textiles are comparable to the symmetry of fabric structures (Frame 1986). For instance, glide reflection is the basis of the figural repeats in the borders here; this repeating pattern "is generated by the same axes of glide reflection that generate the structure of an oblique interlaced fabric" (Frame 1991: 138-139 and fig. 4.22).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the alternation pattern of the shamans may have been determined by, and hence may encode an abstract reference to, three-strand braiding. It is as if, in effect, there were an imaginary braid around all of the edges (interior and exterior) of the garment.

In fact, there is what *looks* like actual braiding attached to these edges, in the form of cross-knit looped edging. Paracas Necrópolis garments, including this one, frequently have these supplementary edgings. Cross-knit looping is a single element construction; though it does not resemble oblique interlacing in its structure its face "is sometimes described as braided" (Emery 1966: 32 and figs. 12, 14, and 373). I submit, then, that a fourth level of iconography comprises a double reference to oblique interlacing around the perimeters of the poncho, one embodied in figural symmetry patterns in the borders and the other in the auxiliary edging.

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<sup>3</sup> Frame's thesis is supported statistically and contextually in a recent study of the figural orientation patterns in the borders of 543 Paracas Necrópolis textiles (Paul forthcoming b).

Virtually all Paracas Necrópolis embroidered textiles have images embroidered in borders, but relatively few (165) have additional figures embroidered in their fields. The motions of symmetry present in the field patterns of these 165 garments are related to those in borders, and include glide reflection, bifold rotation, translation, and mirror reflection. Using these four isometries Paracas/Topará weavers produced a variety of patterns, some of which may also allude to the symmetry of fabric structures (Paul 2000c). Here, the shamans are positioned at right angles to the sides of the garment with three columns of figures on either side of the neck border, plus one figure at each of its ends. The pattern is not regular in all areas of the cloth: six images in the upper left section of the field are oriented incorrectly relative to the orientation pattern on the rest of the poncho (this section is circled in Figure 2 with a dotted line). In addition, there are inconsistencies in the alignment of these figures due to the fact that columns one and three are each missing a figure at the top, and column two has been shifted upwards to fill up the space. Leaving aside this corner of the poncho, the remaining figures in the three columns on each half of the poncho repeat using glide reflection along vertical axes. Frame (1991: 136-137 and fig. 4.22) was the first to point out that orientation patterns of this type have the same underlying symmetry as that of three-strand oblique interlacing.

One of the defining characteristics of the Paracas Necrópolis textile style is the use of color to encode a specific system of logic on cloth, specifically in the fields of garments. Every image embroidered on a garment is colored according to a particular color plan. This poncho, for example, has a total of 76 figures (including 36 in the borders and 40 in the field), but they are colored in just three different ways. These color configurations, or color blocks, are identified with the letters A, B, and C in the diagram in Figure 4. Field images are aligned so that their color blocks create a regular pattern along the S and Z diagonals, horizontal rows, and vertical columns. Turning the garment on its side so that the legs of the figures are vertical<sup>4</sup>, the color block alternation in both the upper half and the lower half of the field can be described as having tricolor S diagonals, tricolor Z diagonals, tricolor rows, and monocolor color columns (the shorthand code for this pattern is 1 tri.szr, 3 mono.c; Figure 4). Though the color pattern in the two halves is the same, the two sections are not aligned (note, for example, that the monocolor columns in the top half do not align with monocolor columns of the same color block in the bottom half).

When examined alone, isolated from the corpus of Paracas Necrópolis textiles, the significance of the poncho color pattern is not apparent. However, when the arrangements of the color blocks in the fields of 154 Paracas Necrópolis weavings are viewed collectively, it becomes evident that there is an underlying and pervasive system of order present in these color layouts. I have described elsewhere the rules that form the foundation of this system of organization (Paul 1997 and 2000b). The results of those studies indicate that a body of systematized knowledge was embedded in the color patterns of Paracas Necrópolis textiles and that a combinatorial logic was the cornerstone

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<sup>4</sup> This poncho forms a set with other garments (see below) in which the color patterns are based on viewing the shamans with their legs oriented vertically. Hence, for the sake of consistency in coding color block alternation, the poncho is turned on its side.

of Paracas color design. In other words, Paracas/Topará weavers and embroiderers arranged color blocks in as many different color configurations as possible within the limitations of certain compositional restraints and, over time, created a combinatorial structure on cloth through color patterning.

## Conclusions

This poncho was originally part of a set of matching clothing that included a mantle and skirt that are now in The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C. (Bird and Bellinger 1952: pls. VI, X, XLV, and XLVI; the mantle is in a fragmentary condition). All three have shaman iconography stitched in three color blocks of similar colors, and all three have the color pattern 1 tri.szz, 3 mono.c in their fields. The images on the mantle and skirt borders repeat using glide reflection, like the poncho, but only the mantle has the same underlying symmetry structure in its field. On the skirt, pairs of design units repeat in bifold rotation on both diagonals (Paul 2000c).

If we imagine a Paracas/Topará man (Figure 5) putting on these garments 2000 years ago for ritual occasions (and I believe that some of the Paracas Necrópolis garments were used in life), what kinds of messages did his dress convey to others, and what kinds of symbolic things did his dress do for him?

First, the shaman iconography likely signaled to those around him his status within the community. Much of the textile iconography in a bundle informs us of the social roles fulfilled by the person in that bundle; one theme that is often present in bundles is that of the shaman (Paul 1991). Unfortunately, the poncho, mantle, and skirt presented in this paper are orphans, lacking all scientific information about their bundle provenience. Though it is impossible to reconstruct the universe of embroidered images with which they were originally buried, we may conjecture that it was similar to that in the scientifically-excavated bundles, in which the textile iconography tells us that the ritual obligations of those men responsible for the welfare of Paracas/Topará communities remained fairly constant over time.

Second, when the poncho was pulled over his head, this individual became caught between two twisting strands (the exterior borders) with immaterial circuits moving in opposite directions around his neck (figural orientation in exterior and interior borders). The skirt, with its border images oriented clockwise, was placed against the body and wrapped counterclockwise. The mantle shrouded the torso, with one U-shaped border draped around the neck, either wrapped in front of the chest or left to hang down the front of the body; the second border brushed the back of the knees, horizontal to the ground. When viewed on a human body, mantle images in the upper border are oriented in a counterclockwise direction, while those on the bottom border point clockwise.<sup>5</sup> Like the

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<sup>5</sup> There are other fragments of the Textile Museum mantle in the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich (accession number 78-300457) and in the Seattle Art Museum (accession number PC 40.37). I have reconstructed this description of how a mantle was worn based on all of these mantle pieces and on my studies of many complete mantles.

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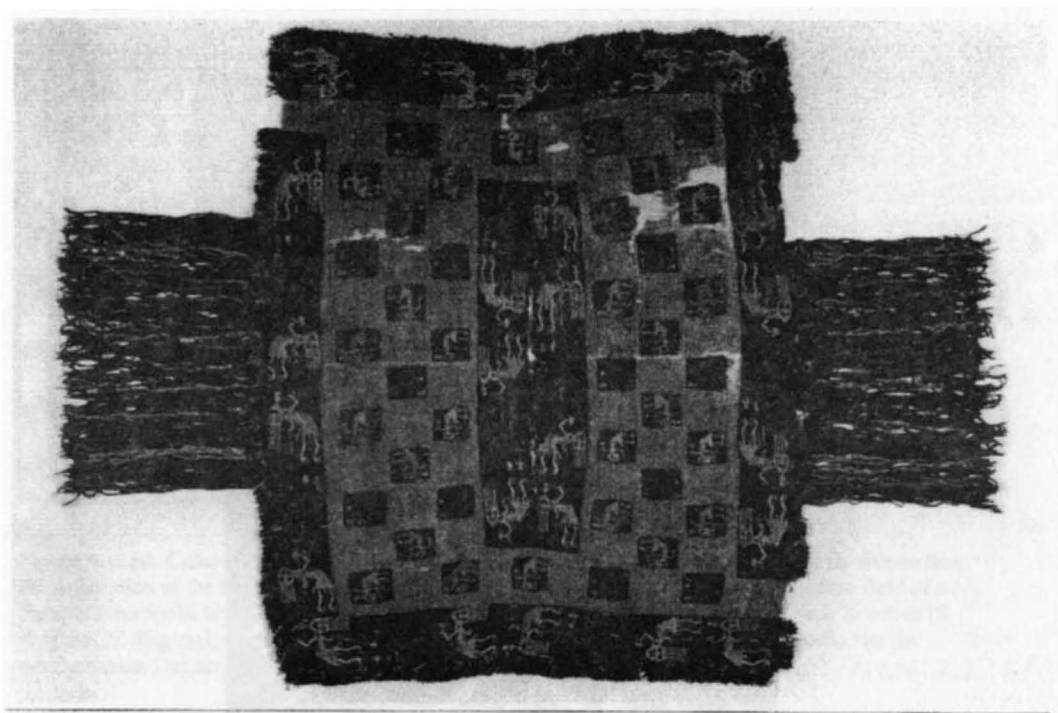


Figure 1. Paracas Necrópolis-style poncho, probably Early Intermediate Period 1, ca. 0-100 AD. AIC 1958.292, Edward E. Ayer, Harriott A. Fox and Samuel P. Avery endowments. Photograph courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago, © 2000. All Rights Reserved.

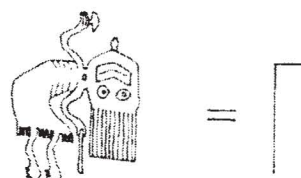
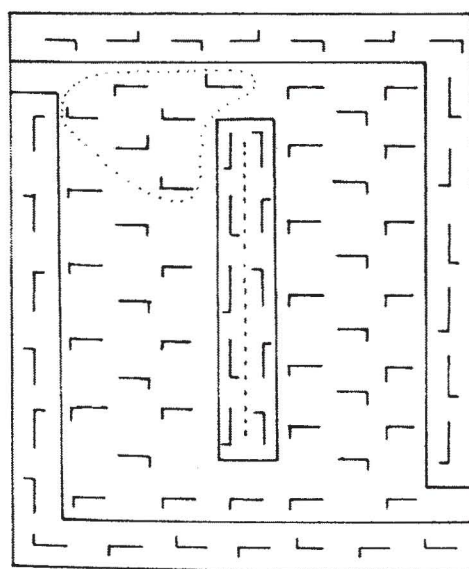


Figure 2. Orientation pattern and embroidered image on poncho AIC 1958.292.

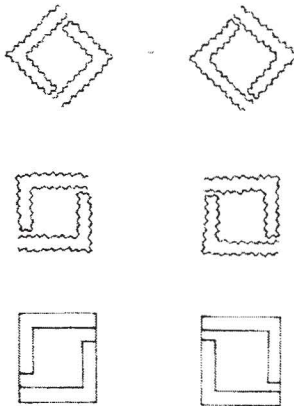


Figure 3. Paracas Ocucaje looped tunic, Early Horizon 9, ca. 200 BC – 100 BC. TM 91.489. Images of S and Z twisted strands are worked into the structure of the garment. Photograph courtesy of The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., no. 91.489. The drawings below the photograph depict segments of the angularized white Z (on left) and S (on right) strand images in the looped tunic and the border formats of Paracas Necrópolis ponchos.

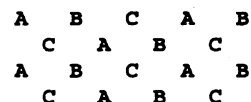
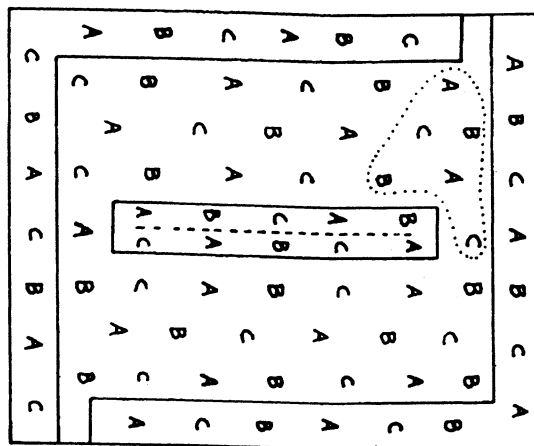


Figure 4. Left: Color block pattern on poncho AIC 1958.292 (the garment is turned on its side so that the orientation of the field figures is vertical; see Figure 2). Right: The color pattern in the field of a Paracas Necrópolis textile is coded by the type of color block alternation present in each direction (S diagonal, Z diagonal, row, and column). When turned on its side (see note 4) this poncho has the configuration 1 tri.szz, 3 mono.c, the same pattern present on a dozen other textiles.

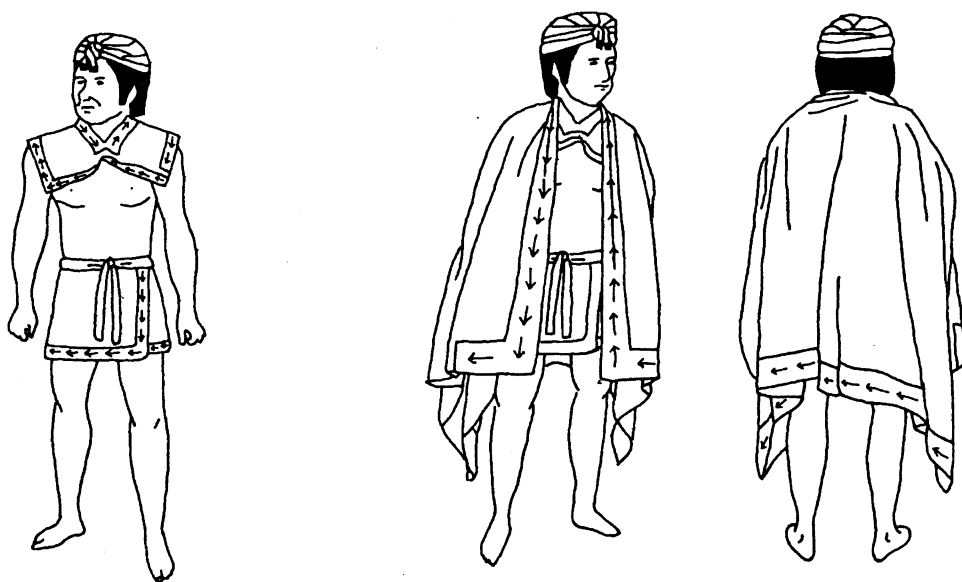


Figure 5. Drawings showing an individual dressed in a Paracas Necrópolis-style headband, poncho, skirt, and (on the right) mantle. The arrows in the borders indicate the direction in which the shamans' heads point.

Z-spun and S-plied threads that were used to weave and embroider the garments analyzed here, the border figural orientation and method of wearing each item of clothing created opposing circular movements within a single garment.

Third, the number of ways of arranging motifs in Paracas Necrópolis borders is so restricted that it is probable that symmetry type itself constitutes another level of iconography. The poncho, mantle, and skirt each carry references to the structure of oblique interlacing in their borders. This abstract allusion to a fabric structure may have provided symbolic, protective boundaries on the weavings by partially "sealing" their edges, an idea that I develop in another study (see Paul forthcoming b). When draped over, on, and around the human body the garments may have conferred similar protection on the individual who wore them, since his entire body would have been enveloped with conceptual fabric structures.

Fourth, the field symmetry patterns of these three items of clothing may derive from the underlying symmetry structures of certain fabrics, possibly reflecting the importance in Paracas/Topará culture of manipulating fiber. Finally, their color block alternation patterns place the poncho, mantle, and skirt within a much broader symbolic context – one in which a system of symbols (the color blocks) was conceived as a means of communicating an idea (an internally coherent system of relationships that constitutes a specific type of logic).

To conclude, while I am well aware of the fact that questions concerning the meaning of ancient artifacts are impossible to answer with any measure of certainty, it is also true that purposeful choices of long duration permeate Paracas Necrópolis textile design. I believe that there were underlying symbolic reasons for adhering to certain elements of iconography and design. I present here the kinds of multiple messages that may have been embedded in one poncho, without pretending that all of my interpretations can be "proved". My objective is to open up new ways of looking at Andean cloth in order to better understand the startling complexities hidden in the woven world of a remarkable Andean people.

### **Acknowledgments**

I thank Christa Thurman, Curator of Textiles at The Art Institute of Chicago, for her help in the preparation of this study.