



24 Paracas Textile

Textile fragments, from the Paracas peninsula, Peru 300–200 BC

Looking at clothes is a key part of any serious look at history. But, as we all know to our cost, clothes don't last – they wear out, they fall apart and what survives gets eaten by the moths. Compared with stone, pottery or metal, clothes are pretty well non-starters in a history of the world told through 'things'. So regrettably, but not surprisingly, it's only now, well over a million years into our story, that we're coming to clothes and to all that they can tell us about economics and power structures, climate and customs, and how the living view the dead. Nor is it surprising that, given their vulnerability, the textiles we are looking at are fragments.

The South America of 500 BC, like the Middle East, was undergoing change. The South Americans' artefacts, however, were on the whole much less durable than a sphinx; there, it was textiles that played a central part in the complex public ceremonies. We're learning new things all the time about the Americas at this date, but, as there are no written sources, much is still very mysterious, compared, for example, with what we know about Asia, belonging to a world of behaviour and belief that we still struggle to interpret from fragmentary evidence like these pieces of cloth, well over 2,000 years old.

In the British Museum these textiles are usually kept in specially controlled conditions, and never exposed to ordinary light and humidity for long. The first thing that strikes you about them is their extraordinary condition. They're each about 10 centimetres (3 or 4 inches) long, and they're embroidered in stem-stitch using wool, from either llamas or alpacas, we're not sure which – both animals are native to the Andes and were soon domesticated. The figures have been very carefully cut out from a larger garment – a mantle or a cape, perhaps. They are strange beings, not entirely human in form, which seem to have talons instead of hands, and claws for feet.

At first glance you might find these figures rather charming, as they appear to be flying through the air with their long pigtailed or top knots trailing behind them ... but when you look more closely, they are disconcerting, because you can see that they are wielding daggers and clasp severed heads. Perhaps the most striking thing about them, though, is the intricacy of the sewing and the surviving brilliance of the colours, with their blues and pinks, yellows and greens, all sitting very carefully judged next to one another.

These jewel-like scraps of cloth were found on the Paracas peninsula, about 240 kilometres (150 miles) south of modern Lima. In the narrow coastal strip between the Andes Mountains and the Pacific, the people of Paracas produced some of the most colourful, complex and distinctive textiles that we know. These early Peruvians seem to have put all their artistic energies into textiles. Embroidered cloth was for them roughly what bronze was for the Chinese at the same date: the most revered material in their culture, and the clearest sign of status and authority. These particular pieces of cloth have come down to us because they were buried in the dry desert conditions of the Paracas peninsula. Textiles from ancient Egypt have survived from the same period, in similar dry climates thousands of miles away. Like the Egyptians, the Peruvians mummified their dead. And in Peru, as in Egypt, textiles were intended not just for wearing in daily life but also for clothing the mummies: that was the purpose of the Paracas textiles.

The Canadian weaver and textile specialist Mary Frame has been studying these Peruvian masterpieces for over thirty years, and she finds in these funeral cloths an extraordinary organization at work:

Some of the wrapping cloths in these mummy bundles were immense – one was 87 feet long. It would have been a social enactment, a happening, to lay out the yarns to make these cloths. You can have up to 500 figures on a single textile, and they are organized in very set patterns of colour repetition and symmetry. The social levels were reflected in cloth to a tremendous degree. Everything about textiles was controlled – what kind of fibre, colours, materials could be used and by what groups. There has always been a tendency to do that in a stratified society – to use something major, like textiles, to visibly reflect the levels in the society.

There was no writing that we know of at this time in Peru, so these textiles must have been a vital part of this society's visual language. The colours must have been electrifying against the everyday palette of yellow and beige hues that dominated the landscape of the sandy Paracas peninsula. They were certainly very difficult colours to achieve. The bright red tones were extracted from the roots of plants, while the deep purples came from molluscs gathered on the shore. The background cloth would have been cotton, spun and dyed before being woven on a loom. Figures were outlined first, and then the details – like clothes and facial features – were filled in in different colours with exquisite precision, presumably by young people, as you need perfect eyesight for stitching like this.

Production would have required coordinating large numbers of differently skilled labourers – the people who reared the animals for the wool or who grew the cotton, those who gathered the dyes, and then the many who actually worked on the textiles themselves. A society that could organize all this, and devote so much energy and resource to materials for burial, must have been both prosperous and very highly structured.

Making the mummy bundles, in other words preparing the Paracas elite for burial, involved an elaborate ritual. The naked corpse was first bound with cords to fix it in a seated position. Wrapped pieces of cotton or occasionally gold were put in the mouth, and grander corpses had a golden mask strapped to the lower half of their face. After this the body was wrapped in a large embroidered textile – our fragments must come from one of these – and the encased body was then seated upright in a big shallow basket containing offerings of shell necklaces, animal skins, bird feathers from the Amazonian jungle and food, including maize and peanuts. Then body, offerings and basket, all together, were wrapped in layers of plain cotton cloth to form one giant conical mummy bundle, sometimes up to 1.5 metres (5 feet) wide.

It's impossible to know exactly what our embroidered figures represent. Apparently floating in the air, with bared teeth and clawed hands, it is easy to imagine that they are not human but creatures from the spirit world. But as they hold daggers and severed heads, perhaps we are in the realm of ritual sacrifice. What is this killing for? And why would you embroider it on a textile? We're clearly in the presence of a very complex structure of belief and myth, and the stakes are as high as they can be. For these are embroideries about life and death. Mary Frame explains:

The severed heads, the wounds, the strange posture, seem to be depicting a whole set of stages of transformation between the human into the mythic ancestor. Blood and fertility seem to be themes that are intertwined with this. These textiles are really directed like a supplication for success with crops. Peruvian land is very marginal – it's terrifically arid down there; the people had an intense focus on rituals that would ensure continual success. Water is necessary for plant growth – blood is conceived of as being even more potent.

When the first Europeans arrived in Central and South America 1,800 years later, they found societies structured around blood sacrifices to ensure the continuing cycle of sunshine and rain, seasons and crops. So these four little embroideries give us a certain amount of information, and can form the basis of a great deal of speculation, about how the people of the Paracas lived, died and believed. But, quite apart from that, they are great imaginative achievements, masterpieces of needlework.

It's certain that American societies at this date, even advanced ones like the Paracas, were much smaller in scale than the contemporary states that we've been looking at in the Middle East and China. It was to be many centuries yet before empires like the Incas would emerge.

But these textiles and embroideries of the Paracas, produced more than 2,000 years ago, are now considered among the greatest in the world. These textiles are seen as part of the fabric of the nation, and in contemporary Peru there is a determined effort to revitalize these traditional weaving and sewing practices in order to connect modern Peruvians directly to their ancient, indigenous, and entirely non-European past.