THE ICA VALLEY, PERU: AN INFORMAL
PROGRESS REPORT FOR DECEMBER 2002
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The Beginnings

The first appearance of the Big Bird, as we affectionately now call it, was almost as mysterious as was the final result, after it was fully unexcavated. While Wallace was busy supervising the last minute recording and photography of the materials from the site during the last week of the 2002 season of excavation, the first report came in from the excavators concerning a new trench from the uppermost edge of the current excavation: a strange "hump" of blue textile, not yet fully uncovered had appeared on the surface of the carefully excavated surface of one pit, under a few wooden poles that suggested a tomb roof. The situation was curious, since all of the previous excavation at the site had consisted of a fill of cultural debris (i.e., human refuse) and the architectural remains of previous floors, stairways, and rooms that had been a series of terraced ceremonial structures on a very steep slope, each rebuilt up over the remains of earlier ones over a period of some 600 years ending around 200 B.C. The "cultural debris" was quite rich in pottery, textiles, and a wide range of food remains, mainly vegetal, as well as some item of shell, wood, bone, and obsidian, but they were almost always in quite fragmented form, as would be expected of discarded refuse. The whole pots and textiles seen in museums are commonly found in the many prehispanic cemeteries found on the Peruvian coast, where the Ica valley lies, but we had never encountered graves or any whole artifacts in our years of digging through the various levels of the structures, which run up to 12 feet in vertical depth in some spots, despite the natural erosion of the rocky crest above the site has resulted in a sheering off and downhill slump of the uppermost levels.

To return to the blue cloth "lumps", the report from the next day's work was truly amazing: a round object covered with brilliant red parrot feather had showed up, and the one piece of blue textile was matched by another, each consisting of long linear arched projections on either side of the central feathered "head". The find struck no familiar chord, so Wallace persisted in the recording in the laboratory, learning only after the next day that what had been uncovered turned out to be the head and two wings that were on the upper end of a very large, solid, textile-covered form that created a "body." (We prefer the Spanish term, fardo, generally used in archaeological contexts, mainly for the typical heavily swathed large bundles that contain mummies)

The pit in which the fardo had been in a nearly vertical position, leaning somewhat on its rather flat back, had to be hastily and thoroughly covered up, since the full bundle was not ready to be removed yet, and there was fear that it might be surreptitiously removed during the night. The plans were to complete the little remaining digging and to remove the fardo the next day. By the usual time for the return of the crew, about 2:00 P.M. in order to allow time for initial processing of the day's finds, the expectations back at the laboratory at the Museo Regional de Ica, but even by nightfall, at about 4:30 in the mid-winter season of July, no one had appeared. Finally, well over an hour after the museum had closed at 8:00, in a commotion heard outside the laboratory building, out of the dark and into the headlights of an unrecognized flatbed truck came dozen people, only partly the known crew members, carrying a huge, tarpaulin covered object on a large door-size board. As it turned out, when our crew first attempted to remove the fardo from its deep and confining burial pit, it proved to weigh close to 200 lbs., and it seemed impossible to remove undamaged with the available equipment. As a result, Mercedes Delgado, the field supervisor, managed to not only obtain a large door-sized board from a nearby hacienda owner, but also the loan of a flatbed truck and roughly half a dozen workers to help with the problem. Probably the most difficult part of the process was not so much getting the fardo out of the pit as it was in maneuvering it across the very steep, rock-strewn slope to a flat area without dumping it off its litter, from which it could be half slid down to the base of the slope at a less steep spot. Thus the reason for the very late arrival at the laboratory, a roughly half-hour trip on moderately rough, but paved roads.
**The Bird Revealed**

After wrestling it through the front door, the bundle was put on its back on the floor and uncovered to reveal a huge form that was 5.5 feet long, 3.5 feet wide, and 2.5 feet high or thick, the body covered entirely on top and sides with a multi-colored feather textiles, with two added wing arches above and somewhat down the side of each "shoulder", both sides covered with a plain blue-dyed cotton cloth that continued all across the back of the body. The head had a vertical molded ridge that suggested the stubby beak of a parrot or raptorial bird, with a red-feathered cloth that covered the forehead and top of the head. The "beak" was covered with a plain off-white cotton cloth that extended under the whole "face"; the simplicity of the bare beak and the lack of any eyes strongly suggest that eyes and a mask-like beak had originally been added to the face. The feather head covering, a separate strip of textile about 8 inches wide, turned out, when the fardo was striped of enough weight to be able to lift it to remove the back cloth, proved to extend in that width down the entire length of the back, covered entirely with variable width areas and cross bands of feathers of various colors, hanging on top of the basic back covering of the plain weave indigo blue, which also continued up over the wing arches and over the front of the wings.

The excellent state of preservation of the cloths and the feathers was not a surprise, given the rainless climate, although excepting the heavy rains that can occur in periods of El Niño, affecting this far south only rarely over the centuries. The excellent run-off on the steep slope and, previously, the depth of the upper levels of occupation, obviously did largely protect the fardo, although along the lower end and up the left side, which had been on the upslope side of the pit, some ancient rainfall was the most likely reason for a complete decay of the textiles in those areas. This damage did, however, have the advantage of showing clearly that at least a fair amount of the "stuffing" consisted of extremely compacted vegetal material, consisting of various types of local wild plants and even some cultivated ones, such as maize, often including the whole plant, complete with roots. We could also see that there had been a layer of simple cloth sewn tightly around the body underneath the outer feathered and blue-dyed surfaces.

**What (or Why) Is It?**

At this point, it should be noted that again that mummy bundles, that is, burial wrapped in various plain rectangular cloths, often padded out with raw cotton, and naturally mummified in the dry climate, have been found in the thousands in prehispanic cemeteries. From certain past eras and coastal areas, these have had human and obviously false heads placed on top of the bundles, and a few have had feather-covered cloth associated with them. But none even approached the near life-size of our fardo, none had the bird head and wings or any other animal form, and none were so lavishly constructed with all exterior surface fully decorated. Therefore, the possibility of our dealing with a mummy bundle seemed remote. In contrast, the figure seemed definitely to have meant to be viewed publicly, from all sides, and in upright position: in other words, it seemed to be what would be considered an idol for some ritual/ceremonial purpose. Given the ceremonial nature of the site, this was not a surprising conclusion, even though no other such freestanding, moveable idols have ever been found on the coast.

**When was it?**

Although the interpretation of the fardo's being meant to be exhibited at least during ceremonies, if not more permanently, is still strongly held by most of our group, one further bit of information needs to be injected here: because the use of abandoned ceremonial structures or their environs for purposes for later burials, undoubtedly for their continued aura of sacredness, small samples of cotton yarn from the feathered textile and of some plant material from the vegetal stuffing were sent for AMS dating, the more recent method of radio-carbon dating involving a Accelerator Mass Spectrometer. The resulting dates, only 16 years apart, put the central dating in the later 7th century A.D. As a few clues had suggested to us, this put the date of the fardo some 800 years after the abandonment of the ritual center at the Cerrillos site, where no re-occupation of the site was at all in evidence.

Therefore the memory of the centuries during which the site functioned as a religiously important one, as well as quite probably some remaining vestiges of the terracing itself, had remained among the valley's inhabitants. That this particular fardo was chosen for burial at
such a revered site fits well with its very unique form and undoubtedly very special status.

This dating puts the fardo at a period of great change in pre-Columbian Near-South Coast history, when the long-lived indigenous Paracas/Nasca art style, having lasted through innumerable phases of internal change, started to show influences from highland areas that eventually swamped the local tradition. The design in the front panel of the feathered textile, plus the technical detail of the use of a blue yarn as the heading cord of woven webs, both fit better with known practices of the later Nasca style transition to the following Middle Horizon styles.

What's Inside—If Anything? An Enticement

Having established the intrusiveness of the fardo into the older ceremonial site, there is one more basic feature to be introduced, namely the question of what might be inside within all the vegetal packing. For one, even though it is unquestionably oversized for a mummy bundle, it still suggested the possibility of also having that function. As a result, we managed to bring in a small portable x-ray apparatus, the fardo being much too heavy to reasonable take to where "normal" ones were located. Although every area could not be covered with such small x-ray plates, and the need to put a plate under the bundle's heavy weight and risk damage of the textile under its back, a shot of the center of the "chest" of the figure's body did show a human skull, and others showed the presence of a tightly flexed body. At this point, we considered it quite possible that there would be offerings accompanying the body-ceramics, metal objects, etc.—although none were seen in direct association with the body. However, decorated textiles were still possible. But all this had to await the opening of the fardo, which would have to be a drawn-out process involving the careful removal and recording of each textile, their placement and method of being sewn together, the removal of the separate body forms, and the careful search through the vegetal packing, before reaching the mummy inside.

Back to What It Looks Like

The fardo had been found in mid-July, but the opening had to be scheduled later, in order to assemble a team of specialists—textile analysts and conservators, physical (or bio-) anthropologists, photographers, and recorders. The "opening" was done during two weeks in September, but before giving all the results, the nature of the materials that were removed in sequence should be detailed: First was the feathered textile that covered the front and sides of the body. The base textile was a plain cotton rectangular, uncut cloth, of off-white color. The feathers average roughly 1.5 -2 inches in length and up to 1 inch in width, have been tentatively identified as coming from the different colored varieties of macaw parrot, indigenous to the tropical forest to the east of the Andes and could have been imported either as loose feathers or in the form of live birds as handy feather-factories. Feathers were knotted in sequence along a cotton yarns, one knot down somewhat from the quill tip, then the quill tip bent over and tied down again, before proceeding to the next individual feather. When strings of such feathers were finished, with colors pre-chosen to fit the desired design, then the strings were sewn onto the base fabric, starting at the bottom, with each line of feathers overlapping the tied quill ends of the previous row. The colors included red and yellow as the most frequent, with a darker red, a turquoise and two shades of darker blue and black. The design, as can be seen in the photos, consist of large red and yellow solid areas, plus a wide blue band below, with a design panel of large checkerboard squares in red, yellow, and blue; there is a narrow band of red and blue triangles below this, with black outlining on the top and bottom of the panel.

The front of the wings and back of the wings were covered with a blue-dyed plain woven cotton cloth; the dye has been identified at the Getty Research Center, as arranged by Ran Boyntor, as indigo (thus the rich blue), but also with a mixture of an unidentified organic element referred to as "Dye X". As is the case for almost all prehispanic textiles, widths greater than approximately 2' (60 cm) are made by whip stitching together more than one length of cloth by the edges; the reason is that the back-strap heddle looms used, with hand inserted bobbins, would not easily accommodate wider individual webs woven by a single person-lengths being no problems, since the warps and finished lengths could be rolled up on loom beams. The back was 3 panels wide, the central one stopping at the back of the head, while the others continued up over the wings to the front. The one unexplained curiosity about these blue panels was that one of the outside ones continued
well beyond the length needed to cover the back from top to bottom; where this extra length went is unknown, because the bottom of the both front and back had become detached and the blue cloth rolled up the back, probably during being slid on its back into the pit. Fortunately, this rolling up protected the blue cloth from being rotted out, as was the lower edge of the feathered cloth on the front.

Since the back cloth could not be freed from under the very heavy fardo until nearly everything else had been removed, it was a complete surprise to find that the 8" width of feather-covered cloth over the forehead of the bird head had, in fact, originally continued completely down the back of the body, lying loosely on top of the blue covering. Although it had no intricate design, the length was covered entirely with a series of multi-colored bands of varying widths, using all the colors found on the front cloth, plus an apparent addition of green.

Underneath both the front and back outer textiles was a second textile layer, stitched tightly over the entire body in two breadths of cloth for each the front and back. Because of its directly contact with the vegetal packing, which must have not been thoroughly dried, these inner textiles actually were much less well preserved that the outer ones; they had carbonized into dark brown spots in many areas, and had disintegrated into many large and small holes in various areas. However, their size and shape could be reconstructed in most cases, and they have been well preserved for storage under the direction of Grace Katterman. They are all of a plain weave (tabby) and, with one exception, of rather finely spun and woven cotton. The one exception, a surprising one, was the occurrence of a fairly small piece of plain, off-white camelid wool that was used on the back of one of the wings; wool, even in this later period, was still a commodity that had to imported from the highlands (either as wool stock or by the seasonal bringing of llama/alpaca herds down to the coast).

Although relatively simple in terms of the rich variety of prehispanic weaving, these interior cloths included one of alternating warp stripes of medium brown and off-white cotton. While the brown would commonly be assumed to be dyed (and was so thought to be by earlier analysts, the brown is now known to have been a variety of naturally colored cotton occurring in Peru; in fact, the purer white, along with other colors, was bred from the wild Andean cottons over the thousands of years of their cultivation.

While the textiles covering the body were of large uncut webs. the added wings and head were prepared separately and added to the body after the inner covering had been finished. The wings were formed by two separately wrapped arched bundles of vegetal material on each side. Bunches of long leaves and stems were curved into long forms and completely wrapped with pieces of cloth. One was then sewn from near the center top of the body form, across and around each shoulder corner, with a narrow tapered end fastened about 1' down the side from the shoulder. A second set was then sewn on top of each side, raising mainly the top arch of the wing. The stitching tended to pull down the cloths over the edge they were being sewn to, so that the surface was flat and the separate bundles were not evident from the surface.

The "head" was then added, although it form was more like that of a mask with an extension back over the top of the skull. If was, like everything else, formed of a moderately thin layer of vegetal material in a convex form, with no chin, a vertical ridge for the beak, and than a bulging forehead. A plain, thick cotton cloth was pulled tightly over this form and fastened on the concave backside. This mask was then nestled between the wings and on top of the upper edge of the body, which was progressively thinner from front to back, forming true shoulders and flowing into the thinner wings.

At this point, the outer textiles were added, the feathered mantle across the front and sides, with its top edge was pulled up and stitched somewhat over the lower edge of the head mask. The side and top edges of the mantel was neatly whip stitched to the blue cloth backing and top wing covering. The end of the strip of feathered cloth was then sewn down of the upper part of the face, down to the top of the beak, with solid red covering the forehead and back between the wings. As noted earlier, this strip continued, apparently freely, down the entire length of the body, with multi-colored banding.

This concludes the description of the outer covering of the body and formation of the wings and heads. After all these were removed (although with the back cloths still under the body, we were then faced with a huge form of
extremely tightly compacted "straw". Given the great weight of the fardo, we had assumed that there were probably some stones and possibly a huanago wood post inside to give the idol enough form and weight to stand up without sagging. What finally proved to be the case was that the contents was almost entirely of the highly compacted plant material, which had been built up of many large handfuls that, despite the very tight packing, still tended to separate out when the packing was pulled apart. The variety of plants included will give us a long list of local cultivated and wild plants when it is completely by a plant biologist.

Now, Back to What's Inside

Dealing properly with mummies (archaeologically speaking) is not a simple matter, and many archaeologists are quite content to not have to deal with them or burials in general, given the time involved in recovering and analyzing them. Also, fortunately for the science, the Peruvian government, via the archaeological branch of the INC (Instituto Nacional de Cultura), has strict regulations on handling burials; prehispanic ones, nevertheless, are so commonly found, especially on the coast, that the national attitude is one of preserving the national patrimony, not the more emotional one of disturbing the dead. As noted previously, the unwrapping had to await the getting together of a number of specialists, including both Peruvians and North Americans, the costs of all supported by a grant from the National Geographic Society.

The removal of the outside textiles has already been covered, so we are left with what was encountered inside the vegetal packing material. (The initial preparation of the textiles for storage and/or further analysis went on while the "unpacking" was being done.) The process, essentially, was one of loosening large "lumps" of the vegetal material, which tended to come loose in what were probably the same forms that the original workers had handled. As in digging soil, the resulting bulk of hay was easily twice the volume of the original. Roughly half way down the thickness of the bird "body", which was still on its back, we found that the upper two-thirds tended to come off in a way that left a flat area, and we also finally found that a separate plain cotton cloth had been wrapped around the upper end of what had been over a foot thick flat bed of the vegetal material, and fastened down onto the lower surface with string and cords passing into the packed stems and leaves; obviously there had been an attempt to ensure that the body was firmly and neatly encased before proceeding with forming the bird's body. After loosening this covering, it took only a few more armfuls of packing to uncover the goal—a small, tightly wrapped body looking like a tiny figure on a huge bed of packed hay.

You may note that nothing has been said about finding anything else besides the body, no burial or ritual offerings, or even any excited notice of more elaborately patterned textiles, as would easily have been (and were) expected in so elaborate a package. The Big Bird (or Winged Shaman) had lived up to its original uniqueness: not only were there no accompanying offerings, but the mummy itself was completely unique, even for poor individuals, in having only the absolute minimal wrappings, so tightly sewn around that all the skeletal features could be seen from the surface. The one rather usual item was that the body was fully flexed, with knees under the chin and arms around the legs, the bundle being less than 3 feet long. The covering was so minimal that the very top of the skull was visible.

Being now so portable, the body was taken by the bio-anthropologist to a hospital to be X-rayed, this time in larger format. Since various positions could be shown, the views of the pelvis proved to contradict the previous interpretation: "he" was a she, but still in the 25-30 year old range. However, the real shock was that the body, although fully articulated, had no flesh, internal organs, or even cartilage, and apparently even any clothes, except for a headband. For the arid coast, with its natural mumification, this situation was extraordinary. We had noticed a few shells of black beetles on the exterior of the body's wrapping, which, as we rather suspected, turned out to be the type that strip the bodies of dead animals and, in the case of these beetle, even the cartilage.

At this point, the last phase of the unwrapping was at hand (and could be better done, knowing was to be found). Our mummy unwrapping expert, Bill Conklin, had honed his skills by setting up a "mummy lab" in an oasis in the middle of the north Chilean desert and processed well over 100 mummy bundles, He constructed a simple humidity chamber on the spot, with a frame cut from foam-core board and lined with clear plastic (the better to see what was going on inside), replete with
temperature and humid gauge. After only some 30 hours inside, with nothing more than a bowl of water, the mummy wrappings were just softened enough so that the stiffness of centuries was relaxed enough to remove the outer wrapping in one piece. It was a simple, but rather nicely brown and white striped cloth, of much narrower stripes than the outer sub-skin of the fardo. It was seriously coated with blue-gray, very fine clay, which we believe was used as a desiccant, fitting what turned out to be apparent when the second wrapping was uncovered.

Keeping up its list of surprises, the condition of body in its inner wrapping was rather shocking. In addition to being covered with many more beetle shells, as well as the larvae of other insects, the wrapping was obviously, especially after the humidification, soaked in apparent body fluids and could never have been removed except in pieces. Therefore he decision was made to stop the unwrapping process, and instead the body was MRI'd so that we have a very detailed picture of the contents. Although it was a disappointment not to have such things as the stomach contents to tell us more about the person in the bundle, the scans will be studies to see what the condition of the bones might reveal; various activities, trauma, and illnesses leave their marks on bones.

So What Can We Say About Her?

The main thing that we generally agree on is that the body itself must have been considered as an offering. And that the Image functioned as an idol, for public viewing in ritual ceremonies, not simply as an elaborated burial bundle. And it was offering in a symbolic sense, quite possibly placed in the chest area to simulate the heart (and maybe lungs) as the essentials to life.

The most problematic question is whether the adult female was an individual of some importance, socially (or politically) or in the area of “health services”, that is, as a curer and/or castor of spells, etc. This is where the lack of jewelry, pottery, or elaborate textile plays an important part, namely in ruling out social status as an elite in anything but status as a shaman. Given the undoubted function of the bird image as representing a deity [or supernatural messenger or speaker (especially if a parrot) to the gods]. I happen to question this, although the others seem happy referring to her as a shamana" or female shaman, because I think she would have been accompanied by at least some sort of shamanic paraphernalia if so. But it's one of the best interpretations.

One of the other quite plausible interpretations is that she was a human sacrifice, a practice very common in the Andes. Since she might have been chosen by some unknown criterion from the general populace, she could well have been a commoner, therefore not in need of offerings (beyond the honor of ending up inside a religious idol). What doesn't fit his scenario is that there was no evidence of the cause of death, and the only reason for not putting her inside "in the flesh", literally, would be not to contaminate the bundle. But they would have known that just bleeding the corpse would be sufficient to rule out much of a problem, given how many padded mummy bundles they normally made, plus the large amount of absorbent vegetal material they used in the bird idol. So that's not a particularly satisfying answer, at least not for the relatively simple type of human sacrifice-on-the-spot.

The possibility of reburial of the bones of some important ancestor can be ruled out by the evidence of flesh still having been present, hence the beetles and other flesh-eating insects.

What I prefer, but obviously can't really prove, is that she died in some accidental and non-violent way, especially by drowning, and the body was not found until it was partially decayed, then was quickly and simply wrapped up minimally and staked out to be cleaned by naturally means. Then the second wrapping of the body and placement in the bundle. If the death was somehow connected with an activity or non-violent event, such as a bad flood, of some significance to the populace, she may have been considered an appropriate individual to be placed in the idol.

Obviously, we're all fishing for an answer; none is really thoroughly satisfying, beyond the idea that SHE is the offering.

Then there is the question of the significance of the bird image. I am convinced that there originally were not only eyes, of shell or other attachable material, but also a beak covering, which, if following the contour of the ridge on the face, would fit mainly a type of bird with a rather flat beak, such as a parrot; that, in turn, would also fit the use of the Parrot feathers for its shirt/dress. Also, parrots were highly valued
in both highlands and coast, first for their rarity or absence there, secondly for their colored feathers, and quite possibly also for their ability to mimic human speech. A parrot figure is also a common motif on the pottery of the area at the time of this idol.

As for further evidence of a bird deity, one Peruvian ethno historian noted evidence in the early colonial documents of a god, Kon, among the earlier south coast fisherfolk, who could soar through the sky and note what was going on below. That doesn't sound too much like a parrot, but is obviously fits a bird, and there are indications, it was female.

Then, for a much earlier time, a male & female pair of deities has been firmly identified from stone carvings, and the female was identified with the upper world, and associated with birds. And I have identified a cayman (jungle crocodile-like creature) with obvious vagina and many young, plus feathers, which comes out as a feathered sky goddess, from painted textiles from the South Coast. In fact, birds are either deities, or associated with deities, in cultures around the world.

So, we have nothing to compare it with, and it is too early to connect directly with anything known of pre-Columbian beliefs and practices in the area at the time of the Conquest So the bird image, which must have functioned in a ritual/ceremonial manner, really can't have much more said about. Ah, those archaeological mysteries!

For information on CIPS south coast excavations, textile course or osteology course, contact Grace at glkatt@hotmail.com.

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