

Peruvian Featherworks

ART OF THE PRECOLUMBIAN ERA

HEIDI KING

with essays by

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Contents

- vi **Director's Foreword**
Thomas P. Campbell
- vii **Acknowledgments**
- 3 **Introduction**
Heidi King
- 9 **Feather Arts in Ancient Peru**
Heidi King
- 45 **Early Featherwork from Ocucaje**
Ann Pollard Rowe
- 55 **The Feathered Dresses of Cahuachi**
Mary Frame
- 63 **A Woman's Feathered Cloth from Cerrillos**
Mercedes Delgado
- 69 **Chimú Feathered Offerings from the Huaca de la Luna**
Santiago Uceda and Heidi King
- 79 **Sacred Featherwork of the Inca**
Johan Reinhard
- 89 **Techniques and Conservation of Peruvian Feather Mosaics**
Christine Giuntini
- 101 **Plates**
Heidi King
- 204 **Notes**
- 209 **Museum Collections with Significant Holdings in Featherworks Consulted for This Publication**
- 210 **Bibliography of Works Cited**
- 218 **Index**
- 222 **Photograph Credits**

Sacred Featherwork of the Inca

JOHAN REINHARD

The culture of the Inca has long fascinated both scholars and public alike. Stories of the Spanish Conquest and eyewitness accounts of the Inca's many achievements have been passed down to us for more than half a millennium. However, it was not until the twentieth century that archaeological and historical studies demonstrated that their empire had existed for less than a hundred years. The Inca began to expand out of the region of Cuzco, their capital, sometime around 1438, and by the time of the arrival of the Spaniards in 1532, they had created an empire that spread over much of western South America. Totalling more than 2,500 miles (4,000 km) in length, its boundaries extended from northern Ecuador to central Chile, making it the largest state to arise in Precolumbian America.

The Inca were renowned for their stonework, roads, agricultural production, and political organization. Only in recent years have we learned about one of their most remarkable accomplishments, not equaled by any other great ancient civilization. The Inca constructed ceremonial sites on the summits of more than a hundred mountains over 17,060 feet (5,200 m) high.¹ They climbed to over 22,000 feet (6,700 m), heights that would not be reached again until the mid-nineteenth century. Many of their ascents in the Andes would not be repeated until well into the twentieth century.

The Inca performed ceremonies on many of the sacred mountains in the lands they conquered, and the offerings they made to the state and to local deities included human sacrifices and precious artifacts associated only with the nobility. The Quechua word *capacocha* was a term often used by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chroniclers to describe this most important of Inca religious ceremonies.² The basic concept underlying the *capacocha* offerings appears to be that major disasters of any type, ranging from the illness of an emperor to a drought, were brought about by acts that provoked a deity (or deities) to cause them. Thus only a major offering could serve to reestablish stability—be it environmental, political, or religious—in the empire.³ Although *capacocha* ceremonies took place at and near Cuzco,



Figure 54. Ceremonial site on the summit of Lulluillaco, northwest Argentina on the border with Chile. People at center left are in the “wind-break” and, to the upper left, at the ceremonial platform. The expedition’s high camp is visible to the lower right. Photo: Johan Reinhard.

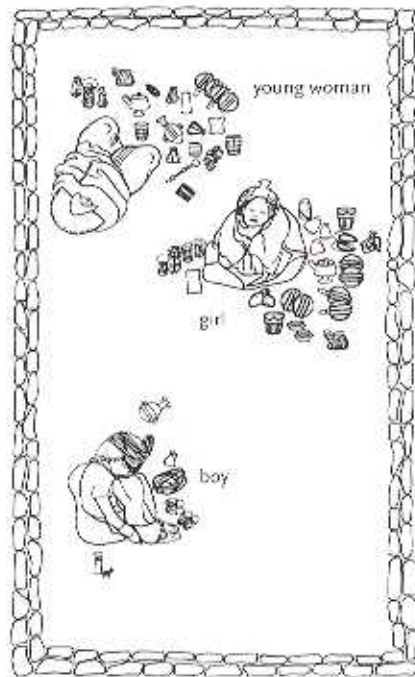
our interest here is specifically in those that involved processions to high peaks well beyond the heart of the empire.

The cold, dry environment of sacred sites at high altitudes has enabled the extraordinary preservation of offering assemblages—human bodies, textiles, food offerings, feathers, figurines, and other objects—providing excellent material for study. Furthermore, such assemblages include what are among the few relatively intact objects of Inca religion to have survived the Spanish Conquest and the destruction of idols by the Catholic Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Unfortunately, many of the mountaintop shrines have been looted, both in the past and in recent times. During the last two decades, however, a few of them have been scientifically excavated, allowing for the artifact assemblages to be studied in context. One of the most spectacular is on the summit of Lulluillaco, at 22,109 feet (6,739 m) the world’s highest archaeological site (fig. 54).⁴ Because it shares many features with other high-altitude shrines, it can be used as a model for comparison and to shed light on the role of feathers in Inca rituals.

Figure 55. Drawing of the walled enclosure in the summit platform of Llullaillaco that contained the burials of the boy, the girl, and the young woman, each with a selection of offerings. Drawing: Johan Reinhard

Figure 56. Male sheet-gold figurine found near the boy. Inca, late 15th–early 16th century. Gold, wool (camelid fiber), spondylus shell, feathers, height including headdress 4 7/8 in. (11.4 cm). Museo de Arqueología de Alta Montaña de Salta. Photo: Johan Reinhard



The isolated volcano of Llullaillaco lies on the border of Argentina and Chile and is the seventh-highest mountain in the Americas. In 1999 three intact *capacocha* burials were excavated in a ceremonial platform on the summit (fig. 55).⁵ The platform is 34 1/2 × 19 3/4 feet (10.5 × 6 m) and was built in part with retaining walls, inside of which a fine gravel and sand fill was placed to create a level surface.

The first burial to be excavated contained the body of a boy about seven years old covered in a red outer mantle. He wore a red tunic under the mantle and had a sling wrapped around his head that served to secure a headdress of white feathers against his forehead. At his side he carried a *chuspa* (see pl. 57) containing coca leaves that was covered in white feathers. Three male figurines made of gold, silver, and shell, together with other ritual offerings, were found nearby.⁶ They wear miniature clothing associated with Inca noblemen or with a deity. Under a gray mantle decorated with a black and red ornamental border, the gold figurine (fig. 56) wears a blue and yellow miniature checkered tunic and carries a small red bag with yellow ornamental borders.⁷ The headdress is formed of five yellow



Figure 57. Headdress found on the head of the young woman. Inca, late 15th–early 16th century. Feathers on wool (camelid fiber). 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (34 x 47 cm). Museo de Arqueología de Alta Montaña de Salta. Photo: Johan Reinhard.

feathers tied with a red thread and inserted in a cephalic blue *llautu*, the special cord that served as a headband.

The second body, buried in the northern section of the platform and wrapped in two brown outer mantles, was that of a young woman about fifteen years old. A white feathered headdress had been placed on her head (fig. 57), and a male tunic was draped over her right shoulder. The headdress closely resembles miniature headdresses on female figurines buried in conjunction with other *capacocha* rituals; it is especially similar to the one worn by the female silver figurine found next to her (fig. 58).

The conical cap of the young woman's headdress is woven with brown camelid wool and has two braided cords for tying under the chin. Fourteen rows of small white feathers (1 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. [3.5 cm] in length) are attached to the cap, pointing downward and partially overlapping so that the stitches are not visible. The impressive semicircular feather crest is composed



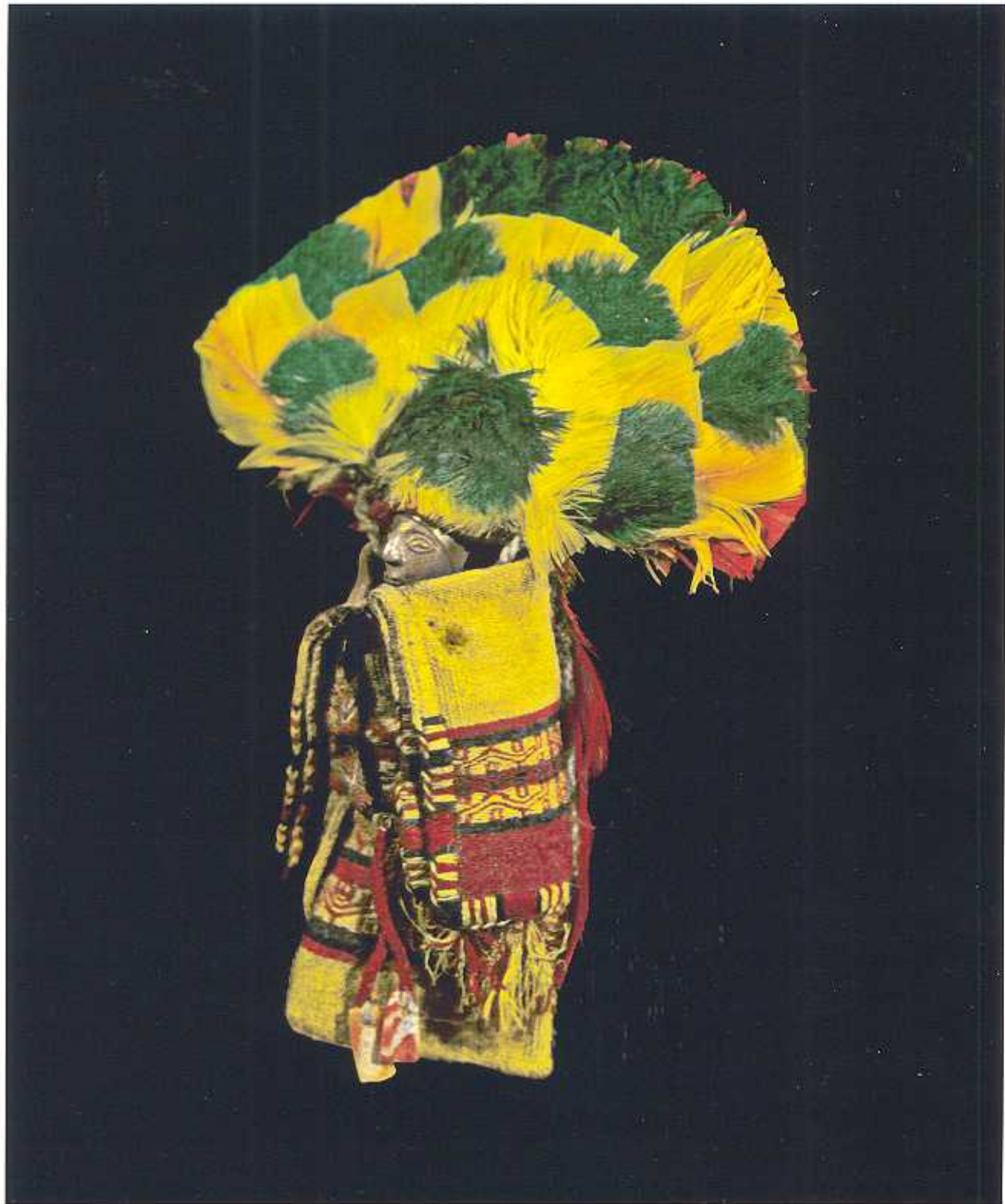
Figure 58. Female silver figurine (front and back) found near the young woman. Inca, late 15th–early 16th century. Silver, wool (camelid fiber), spondylus shell, feathers, height, including headdress, 9 in. (23 cm). Museo de Arqueología de Alta Montaña de Salta. Photo left: Johan Reinhard

Figure 59. Female gold figurine found near the young girl. Inca, late 15th–early 16th century. Gold, wool (camelid fiber), spondylus shell, feathers, height, including headdress, 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (18 cm). Museo de Arqueología de Alta Montaña de Salta. Photo: Johan Reinhard

of a row of medium-size feathers (2 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. [5.5 cm] in length) in front of a row of longer ones (5 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. [14 cm]).

Several textile and ceramic items were placed around the young woman's body on the bottom of the burial. These included typical Inca ceramics, such as a pedestal pot, an *aryballos* (a storage jar with a pointed base), a small jar, and two pairs of plates. Two wood *qeros* (a kind of beaker), a wood spoon, a comb, and six woven bags containing food were also placed in the burial, as well as a small textile band, woolen belts rolled up together, and two small bags containing human hair. Three female figurines made of gold, silver, and the highly valued spondylus shell, all wearing feather headdresses and miniature textiles of camelid wool (mainly alpaca), were found along the left side of the body. The female silver figurine (fig. 58) wears a headdress that is identical to the full-size headdress found on the young woman except that it has a back flap 9 × 4 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches (23 × 12.5 cm) wide completely covered with white feathers. The clothing on the figurine—a red dress folded over at the top and decorated with a geometric banded design in yellow, blue, and green—is typical of garments worn by Inca noblewomen. A red and white shawl, also folded over and with yellow and blue decorated stripes and blue-edged borders, is draped about her shoulders. Three *tupus*, or silver pins, each 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (6 cm) in length, hold the dress and shawl in place. In addition, the figurine is adorned with a red and blue cord, from which are suspended two trapezoidal red spondylus shell pendants.

The third burial, that of a young girl about six years old, was found at the eastern side of the platform. Rather than a feather headdress, a silver metal plaque had been placed on her forehead. Several offerings were arranged around the body, including ceramics of typical Inca style (a pedestal pot, an *aryballos*, three pairs of plates, two bowls, and a jar), a pair of wood vessels, four woolen bags containing food (probably dehydrated potatoes, beans, corn, and dried meat), a pair of leather moccasins, a pair of sandals, and two skin bags containing human hair. Four female figurines—one of gold, one of silver, and two of spondylus shell—wearing grand feather headdresses with back flaps were aligned at the left side of the body, along with a feather-covered bag that contained coca leaves, considered an important ritual offering. The miniature clothing worn by the figurines is similar to that worn by the silver figurine in figure 58. Particularly impressive is the enormous headdress worn by the gold figurine (fig. 59), which is nearly as tall as the figurine itself. The front is completely covered with yellow and green feather mosaic in checkerboard design; the back has a similar pattern in red and orange feathers. The figurine's matching *acsu* (folded dress) and shawl are red and saffron colored with banded geometric decoration in green, black, red, and yellow and ornamental borders; three gold *tupus* secure the dress and shawl. Like the silver figurine in figure 58, the gold figurine is also adorned with a red and black cord with two trapezoidal spondylus shell pendants.⁵



The small figurines found with the burials have sometimes been referred to in the literature as “dolls.” This term could give the impression that they were intended as toys, but nothing could be further from the truth. We know from the chronicles, from the materials the figurines are made of, from their attire, and from the contexts in which they have been found that the Inca presented these types of figurines to many of their most important deities, including the mountain gods.⁹ But exactly what they represented is still being debated. Some scholars have suggested that they were substitutes for human sacrifices or, in the case of female figurines, that they may have been symbolic representations of the *aqllakuna*, or chosen women.¹⁰ Male figurines bear attributes of the nobility and appear to represent members of the Inca elite.¹¹ Several chroniclers, however, state that the figurines represent deities.¹² Of course, meanings probably varied according to circumstances, but at high-altitude shrines, it would indeed seem most likely that figurines represented deities, including those of the mountains themselves.

Examining these three burials, a number of features can be compared with the historical descriptions written by the Spanish chroniclers and with *capacocha* burials investigated at other sites. In the case of the boy, we know that headdresses similar to his were worn on special occasions, such as at major ceremonies, by important Inca men.¹³ When wrapped around the head the sling looked like, and could function as, a *llautu*, the headband worn by the Inca elite.¹⁴

The perfectly preserved white feather headdress of the young Lullaillaco woman (fig. 57) is similar to the few headdresses found in female burials at other high mountain shrines.¹⁵ Closely resembling the miniature headdresses worn by many of the female figurines accompanying the mummies, they lack the panels, usually covered in feathers, that extend down the backs of the figurines.¹⁶ Such back panels (also called back flaps or dorsal pieces) have not yet been found in *capacocha* burials.¹⁷

Feather headdresses clearly had special ritual importance and were likely related to the status of the *aqllakuna*, since they have been found in association with young women, but not with younger girls. The female figurines—whether of gold, silver, or spondylus—are nearly the same with regard to the style of clothing they wore (compare figs. 58 and 59).¹⁸ Their headdresses also are consistently similar and comparable to those found with the female *capacocha* mummies.

The male figurines had headdresses of a different style (see fig. 56), which also parallel—albeit not as closely—those found with male *capacocha* mummies. Interestingly, the drawings of the Inca by the native Peruvian author and illustrator Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, dating from the early seventeenth century, depict Inca nobles wearing headdresses that are markedly similar not only to the type placed on the male mummies but to those on the female

mummies as well.²⁹ Indeed, the types of headdresses found on female mummies are portrayed by Guaman Poma only on male nobles. This raises the question of whether the female sacrificial victims were allowed to wear such headdresses because of their unique status or whether Guaman Poma simply was not aware of their use by women in ceremonial contexts.

Most male and female figurines in museum collections are unclothed, but on the basis of finds made at sites where conditions allowed for good preservation, it seems clear that the vast majority of – if not all – Inca anthropomorphic figurines made of gold, silver, and spondylus shell originally were clothed.

According to the historical sources, feathered garments were used in ceremonial contexts and worn by nobles.³⁰ Their use was forbidden to those who did not receive them from the Inca.³¹ During festivals, clothing adorned with feathers was worn by some participants, as it was by ritual specialists.³² Several chroniclers noted the ritual importance of feathers. Pablo José de Arriaga described feathers used as offerings, distinguishing the red and yellow feathers of the parrot from the white feathers of a bird found in the highland lakes and the pink feathers of the flamingo.³³ Of Inca featherwork the Jesuit Bernabé Cobo wrote admiringly: “The feather cloths were the most esteemed and valued, and this was quite reasonable because the ones that I have seen would be highly regarded anywhere.”³⁴

It is a tragedy that both natural and human actions have resulted in the destruction of the vast majority of feathered objects made by the Inca. However, thanks in large part to the remarkable preservation of artifacts at some high-altitude sites, enough examples of their craftsmanship have survived to count the Inca among the finest practitioners of the feather arts.

5. Moisés Tufinio, personal communication, March 2011. The figurine was carved of spondylus shell and dressed in the same finely made miniature clothing commonly found on Inca offerings (see, for example, figs. 25, 58, and 59 in this volume). The figure did not wear a feather headdress.
6. The garments have not received any professional conservation treatment and are shown here as they were found.
7. Tufinio 2003: 19–24.
8. Tufinio 2006: 70–72.
9. Tufinio 2004: 37–50.
10. Tufinio 2008: 15, fig. 4; Abadía de Daoulas 1999: 32, pls. 15–21.

Reinhard, “Sacred Featherwork of the Inca,” pages 79–87

1. Beorchia Nigris 1985 and Beorchia Nigris 2001.
2. Reinhard and Ceruti 2010: 6.
3. See MacCormack 2000: 124.
4. Reinhard 1993: 31.
5. Reinhard 2005: 299–307; Reinhard and Ceruti 2010: 66–84.
6. For descriptions of typical figurines found with *capacocha* burials, see Millán de Palavecino 1966; Beorchia Nigris 1985; Michieli 1990; Palma Gaete 1991; Dransart 1995; A. Rowe 1997; Beorchia Nigris 2001; Schobinger 2001, *passim*; Schobinger, Ampuero, and Guercio 2001; Ceruti 2003; and Schobinger 2004.
7. Reinhard and Ceruti 2010: 196.

8. *Ibid.*, 197.
9. Arriaga 1968: 11; Cobo 1990: 13, 45–46.
10. Farrington 1998: 56.
11. Betanzos 1996: 48.
12. For example, see Cobo 1990: 46.
13. *Ibid.*, 151, 187.

14. Instead of a sling, the boy found by looters in a *capacocha* burial on Mount El Plomo wore a headdress of feathers (Quevedo and Durán 1992: 198). The boy found sacrificed on Mount Aconcagua also had a feather headdress (Abal de Russo 2001: 217, 238). When reconstructed it was of a different style from the Lullallaco and El Plomo headdresses, forming a circular crown.

15. A similar headdress was documented with one of the females found at an altitude of 19,200 feet (5,850 m) on Ampato in Peru. However, in that example the feathers had been folded over, as the Inca were unable to dig deeper into the frozen ground (Reinhard 2005: 63). Another partially preserved feather headdress was found with the older female sacrifice recovered from a disturbed burial on the summit of Cerro Esmeralda in Chile (Baker 2001: 104–7; Checura Jeria 1977: 136).

16. Dransart 1995: 6; Palma Gaete 1991: 67; A. Rowe 1997: 24. Techniques employed in making feathered headdresses for figurines can be found in Baker 2001: 105, 320–22, and Palma Gaete 1991: 67–69.

17. A possible exception would be that of a feathered textile recovered with the older girl on Esmeralda. However, it is still unclear whether this back panel was attached to the headdress or worn separately (Baker 2001: 107–8).

18. See Dransart 1995: 6–8, 12–16.

19. Guaman Poma 1980: 78–95, 124–40.

20. A. Rowe 1997: 10.

21. Betanzos 1996: 195.

22. See *ibid.*, 66. A rare, badly damaged feathered tunic was found with the Aconcagua boy (Abal de Russo 2001: 216).

23. Arriaga 1968: 45. Entire birds were reportedly sacrificed (Cobo 1990: 113), but they have not yet been reported from *capacocha* burials. Isolated feathers were also offered; a few were found buried in the ceremonial platform on Lullallaco.

24. Cobo 1990: 225.

Giuntini, “Techniques and Conservation of Peruvian Feather Mosaics,” pages 89–100

1. Gill 2007: 83ff.
2. *Ibid.*, 79ff.
3. Schulenberg et al. 2007: 12.
4. A. Rowe 1984; Paul 1990; Reina and Kensinger 1991; Reid 2005.
5. Reid 2005: 352.
6. I am especially grateful to Paul Sweet, Collections Manager, Department of Ornithology, American Museum of Natural History, New York, for sharing with me his vast knowledge of birds and for allowing me to study specimens in the bird skin collection in support of this research.

7. Prum 2006: 295ff.

8. Hill 2010: 60–63.

9. *Ibid.*, 111.

10. For an extensive bibliography, see McMichael 2008: 49–50.

11. Sick 1993: 253.

12. McMichael 2008: 35–47.

13. Sick 1993: 254.

14. O’Neill in A. Rowe 1984: 147.

15. Fester and Cruellas 1934: 156; Frame 2005: 22–23.

16. McGraw in Hill and McGraw 2006: 354–55.

17. Different instrumental techniques are being applied in the analysis of the colorants. The studies are being conducted by Marco Leona and Nobuko Shibayama, both of the Department of Scientific Research at the Metropolitan Museum.

18. Greene 1991: 25.

19. This adhesive was identified using FTIR and ELISA instrumentation by Julie Arslanoglu and Hae Young Lee at the Metropolitan Museum in 2011. A full report can be found in the files of the Department of Scientific Research.

20. For additional descriptions and diagrams of techniques, see Mead 1907; Yacovlev 1933, and Greene 1991.

21. For an example of spiraling strings, see Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., acc. no. 42-12-3073368. See also plate 26 in this volume.

22. See note 19 above.

23. O’Neill in A. Rowe 1984: 156.

24. A very simplified description of the ¹⁴C method includes the following information. All living things incorporate carbon into their tissues, and this process continues until the death of the organism. After death, some of the carbon (known as the ¹⁴C fraction), which is unstable, begins to disappear through a process known as radioactive decay. Scientists have determined that the amount of ¹⁴C (as a percentage of the weight) absorbed by living organisms remains fairly constant over time and decays at a fairly steady rate after death. Thus in a pure carbon sample of known weight, the portion that would have been ¹⁴C can be estimated and compared to the amount left in the sample at