



Medieval Textiles

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Aztec Textiles

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When Conquistador Francisco Pizarro ransomed the Incan ruler Atahualpa, Atahualpa readily supplied the room full of gold and two rooms full of silver asked of him. Although the metals were readily crafted into pleasing forms, they had no intrinsic value to the Inca.

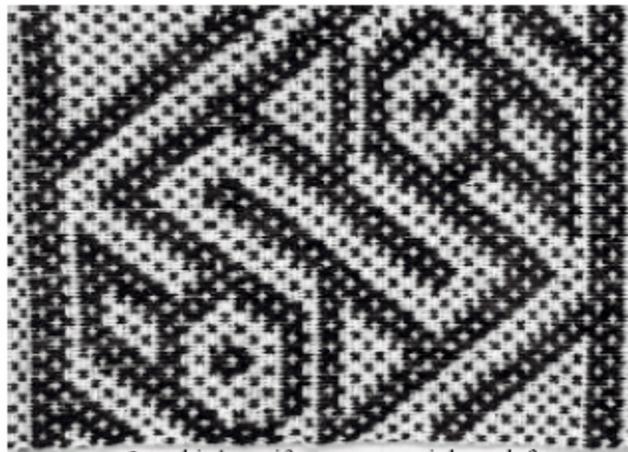
Rather, the coin of the realm was the extraordinary woven cloth, each piece representing thousands of man hours of work. As a form of wealth, it was traded and given as gifts between rulers, and even burned or sacrificed as offerings

The Incas grew and used cotton; raised llamas as beasts of burden, food, and for their wool for weaving slings and sacks; raised alpacas for their soft wool for clothing; and hunted wild vicuna for wool for the garments of the elite. Most people wore simple tunics made of cotton or alpaca cloth. The finest cloth or cumbi was reserved for the Sapa Inca (Supreme Inca), his family & privileged individuals.

Professional male weavers and wives of provincial officials produced cumbi as a tax payment; special garments intended for sacred rites worn by the emperor usually came from the skilled hands of women in religious service. An elaborate tapestry tunic could have as many as 400 ends per inch. Woven patterns varied greatly from location to location, and because the Inca forbade changes in regional dress when they conquered a rival city, the place of origin for a textile can be ascertained by the pattern and methods of weaving.

The looms used were backstrap looms not unlike those used today, however the warp is not directly connected to the bars, but to a small cord running parallel to the bars and attached to the bar at intervals. The entire warp is exposed as this loom does not

have a warp beam. The warp ends went from one cord to the other in a wrapping or lacing movement. Because of this, the woven pieces are small and have 4 selvedge edges. In instances where wool and cotton are used, the cotton is warp and the wool is weft. According to D'Harcourt, here are no exceptions to this rule.



Inca bird motif, warp runs right to left

The type of Peruvian weaving demonstrated here was from Coastal Peru, and at least in the case of the Johnson textiles, were purchased in Lima, Peru. As D'Harcourt and others have published texts including textiles from Incan cities no further North than Ancon, and this weave is not found among them, I assume this style of weaving was to be found north of Lima, and the textiles were brought to Lima for sale to tourists. These ornate ancient textiles are found with Peruvian mummies only, the "everyday" cloth being primarily tabby with little ornamentation.

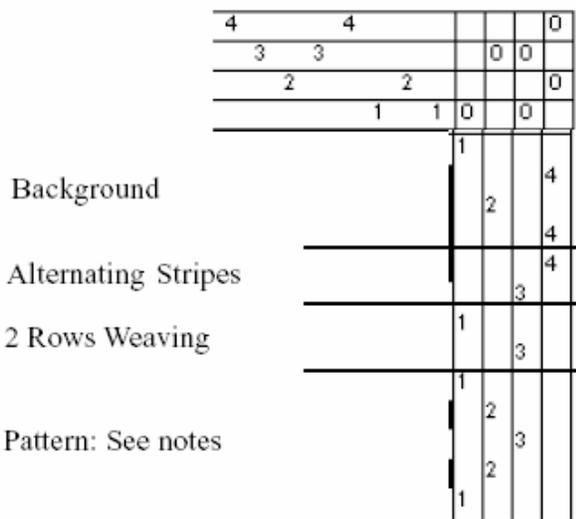
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From examination of such texts, and discussion with Ed Franqumont, these cloths may have come from the Chancay area burial ground, which was in use from about 1200 to about 1300 AD.

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In Issue 22 (December 1999) I wrote a quick bit about Aztec textiles. In this and future issues I plan on outlining various weaving techniques and patterns for weaving these textiles.



Depress treadle 1 (dark)
 Pick up pattern per graph
 Depress treadle 3 (light), lift pick up stick, throw shuttle in combined shed.
 Depress treadle 1 (dark) pick up same pattern.
 Depress treadle 2 (other dark shed), lift pick up stick, throw shuttle in combined shed.
 Remove pick up stick. DO NOT CHANGE SHEDS, pick up next row in pattern.
 Depress treadle 3 (light), lift pick up stick, throw shuttle in combined shed.
 Continue process until you have woven your whole pattern.
 You will notice that once you get going, when treadle 3 is depressed you are throwing the shuttle from either the left or the right. This is not going to change. You will always throw (for example) the shuttle right to left when the lighter ends are up, and left to right when going under the darker ends only.

Sources:

D'Harcourt, Roul. *Textiles of Ancient Peru and their Techniques* University of Washington Press (c) 1977 ISBN 0 295953314

Johnson, Nellie Sargent. *Ancient Peruvian Warp Pattern Textiles*. Handweaving News October 1942

Franqumont, Edward. Personal correspondence of August 20, 1998

Weaving Notes:

The warp is made of alternating threads in dark and light. The most common colors for this weave is white and indigo blue or white and brown. The brown could either be naturally colored cotton or dyed cotton. The warp on shafts one and three are dark in this example and those on two and four are light. Weft is only one color. The pattern is made using pick up technique but although I used graph paper and have reproduced patterns common in Aztec weaving this technique lends itself well to free form pattern weaving. The color raised is marked in parenthesis. My samples were woven on a countermarche loom

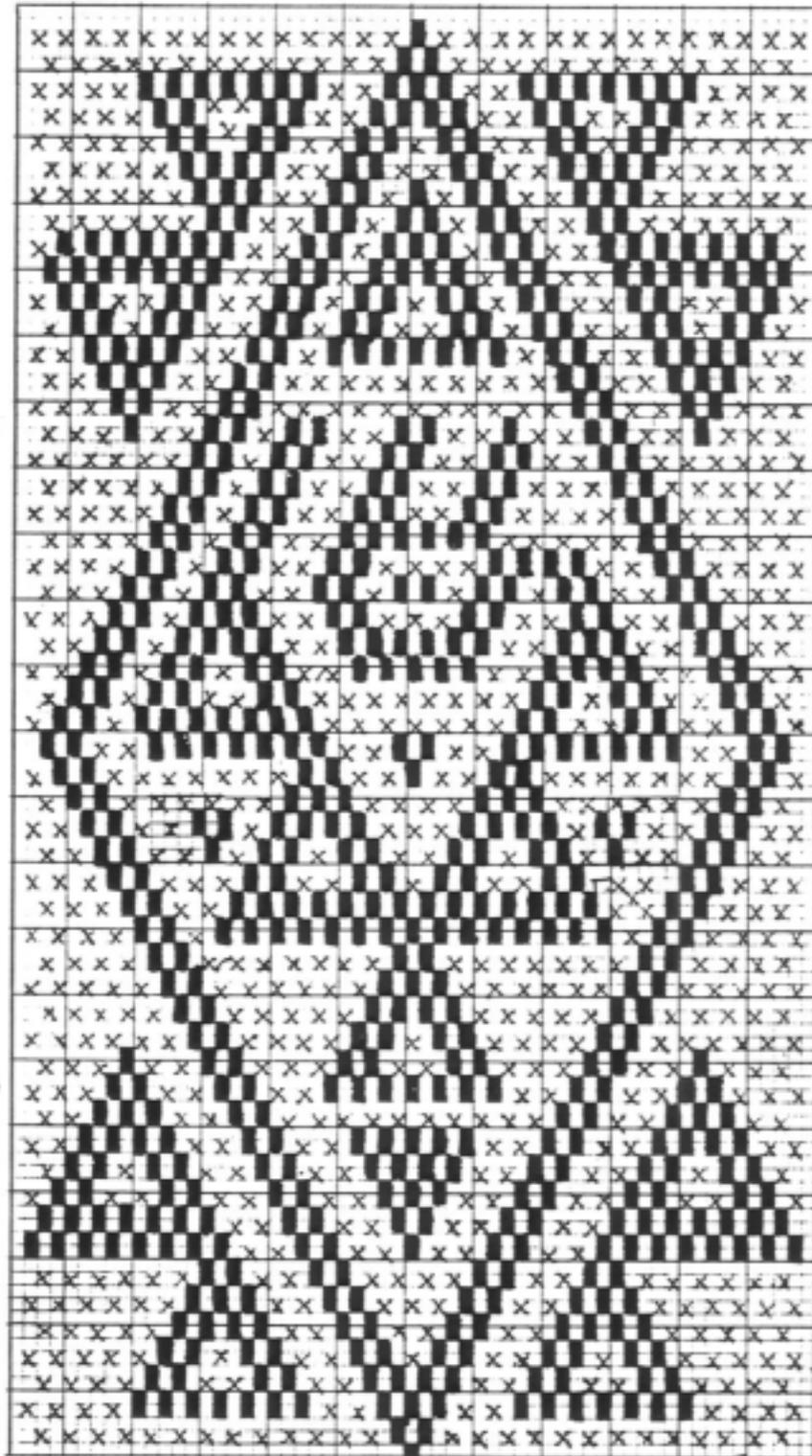


Image by Nellie Sargent Johnson
Black rectangles indicate
thread pairs to pick up

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