"The Inka's Tunics"

Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History. **Eds. Kenneth Mills and Williams A. Taylor. Wilmington, DL: A Scholarly Resources, 1998. 14-18.**

2

The Inka's Tunics

(fifteenth to sixteenth centuries)

Both coastal and highland peoples of pre-Hispanic Peru excelled in textile making. An indigenous weaving tradition still flourishes today, especially in the Andes mountains. To a certain extent, skills in the two major available fibers (a hardy cotton: *Gossypium barbadense*, and wool from the native camelids: llamas, alpacas, and vicuñas) developed out of a need for warm clothing, particularly in the high Andes where temperatures can fluctuate sharply both by day and by season. Yet, although woven blankets, clothing, sacks, saddlebags, and pouches for carrying coca leaves were items of necessity, textiles might also function as forms of cultural and political expression. Andean techniques and patterns were many, and a startling number of colors was produced by the dyes from local plants and the secretions of shellfish and insects (on the use of red from the cochineal beetle in another region, see Selection 13). The elaborate textiles created by the Paracas peoples of the central Peruvian coast during the first millennium B.C. are perhaps the most celebrated examples of these ancient Andean arts, although expert textile making was widespread down to the last and best-known Andean state before the Spanish arrival, that of the Inkas, and continued through colonial times.

Figures 1 and 2 are examples from this tradition of meaningful fabrics in the form of *uncus*—Quechua for sleeveless tunics. The first garment (Figure 1), an Inka key checkerboard tunic, is from Inka times, and the second (Figure 2), a royal tunic, may be from the early colonial period. Of all the distinctive accoutrements and apparel of the Inka royalty—the crown or ornamented headgear (*masca paycha*), a colorful feather collar (*huallca*), the scepter (*suntur paucar*), the halberd (*tupa yauri*) and the golden beaker (*tupa cuśi*), or the club (*champi*)—the uncu may have said the most about its wearer to his viewers. The abstract patterns and designs on the uncus conveyed complex symbolic information about order in the Andes and the universe. The unique king and son of the Sun, the Sapa Inka, wore a number of tunics that told of his exalted position within an elaborate set of social and political relationships. An uncu might also set out an interpretation of history, with its precise iconography establishing a living ruler's special identification with an ancestral king. A ruling Inka's tunics changed with the calendar and to meet the needs of feasts (*raymi*) or other occasions.

The checkerboard effect created by numerous abstract, square design units (*tucapu* or

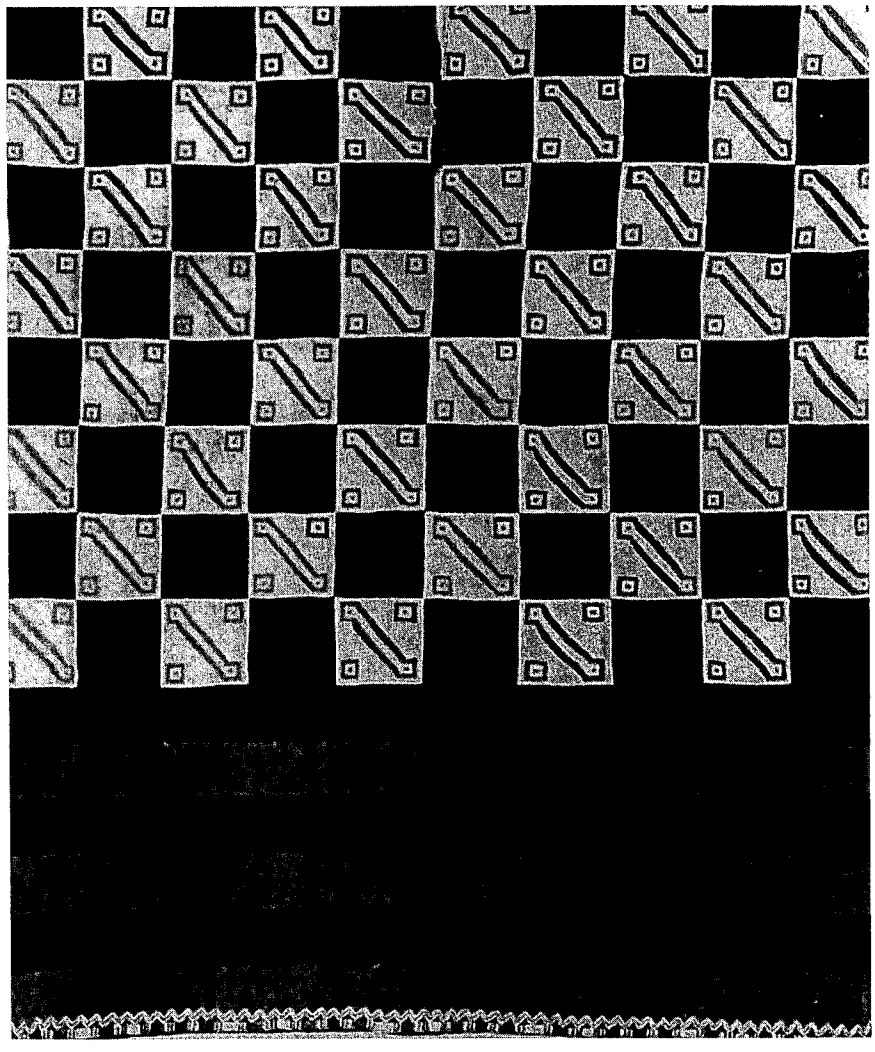

Figure 1. An Inka key checkerboard tunic (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries). Courtesy of the Textile Museum, Washington, DC.

t'oqapu) was called the *collcapata* motif, and it was one of the standardized types in surviving pre-Hispanic tunics. The squares might be a striking black and white; or, as in the upper two-thirds of the first uncu, each square might alternate in color and contain a standard pattern that John Howland Rowe has called the "Inka key." (The lower one-third of this tunic features six bold stripes in alternating red and blue.) The collcapata design is thought to suggest the rows of stone storehouses (*collca* or *colca*) to which agricultural tribute flowed from the four quarters of the empire (Tawantinsuyu, or Land of the Four Quarters). The collca were the particular attributes of Andean farmers—non-Inkas such as the peoples from Huarochirí, whose traditions were encountered in Selection 1—and many others throughout Tawantinsuyu. The collcapata seems to have expressed concepts of commonality and, ultimately, unity of all ranks of people, representing a careful kind of foundation upon which the structure of Inkaic universalism was built.

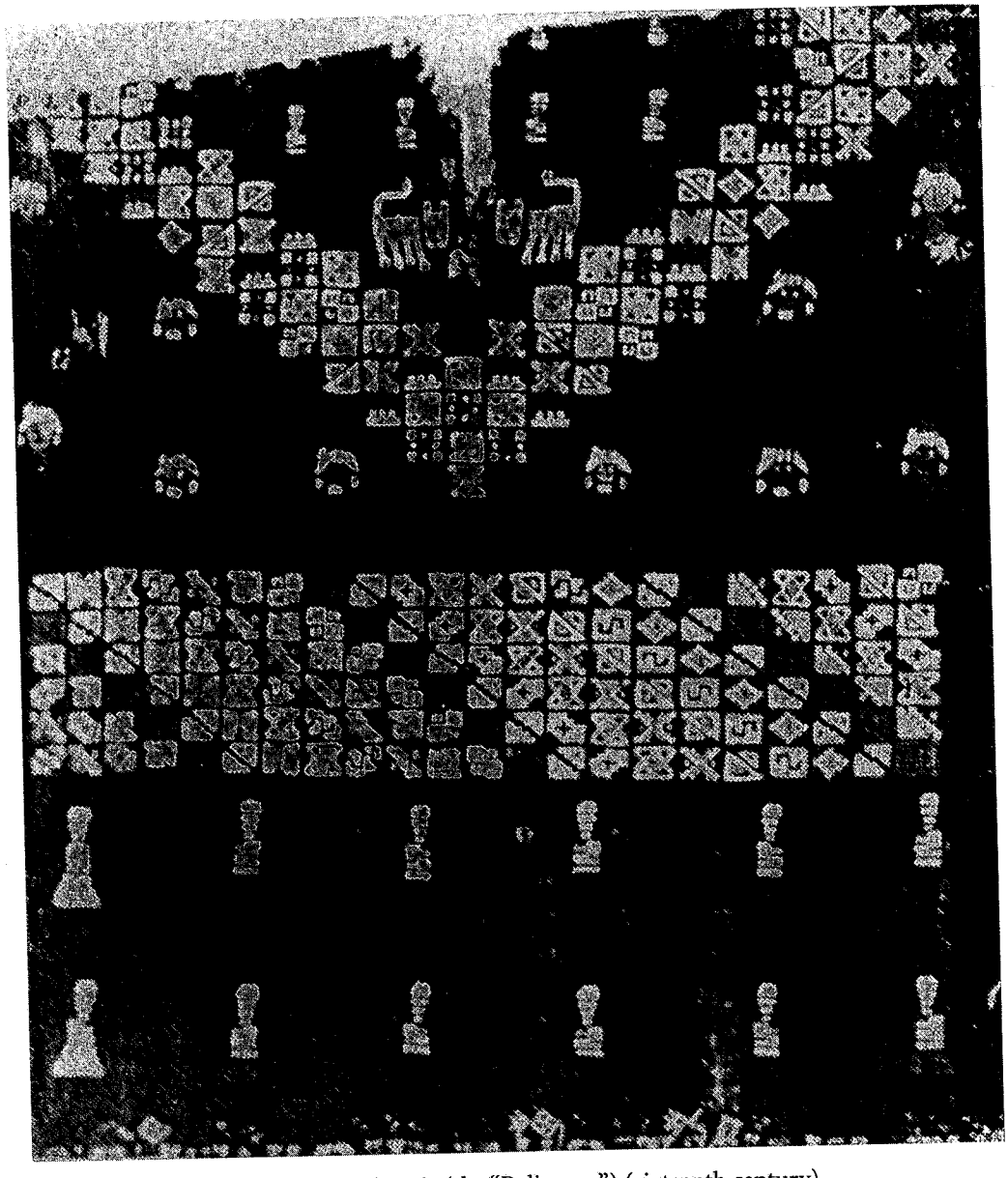

Figure 2. A royal tunic (the "Poli uncu") (sixteenth century).

A tunic with a collcapata design was worn by the Inka when he attended one of the three principal feasts of the year to which all kinds of people came, the Inka *raymi* in May. The Collcapata was also worn when the Sapa Inka and his noble retinue left the Valley of Cusco and toured the provinces. On these occasions the royal uncu featured neither of the two kinds of royal borders around the ruler's neck—the *ahuaqui*, a V-shaped yoke design of woven squares, or the huallca collar. Such a border is not present in our first uncu, but in the second one it is there in the form of an ahuaqui yoke (in this example, there are four

rows of exquisite tucapus on either side of the tunic's neck opening). Since the border signified the separation of the divine Inka from his subjects, stressing the grandeur of the political head, such symbols were absent on popular and inclusive occasions. The Inka also wore another type of tunic featuring a *casana* design—a large square frame with four smaller squares within, woven into the lower half of the tunic—particularly in the foot-plowing and planting season, August and September, with which it was most associated. Its political message seems to have been a nuanced one about hierarchy and integration: the casana was often worn in combination with an ahuaqui neck border and might also be juxtaposed with the collcapata motif.

Just as surely as the Inka's uncu and other attributes could project a message of measured inclusion and alliance to peoples beyond the Inka royalty and notables or in the outlying provinces, the uncu could also communicate details of power and succession to those at the political center. At the festival of Capac raymi, attended only by the Inka, the royal relatives, and the Cusqueño elite, a so-called royal uncu was worn. According to Rowe, our second tunic is probably an heirloom of a noble family woven in the Inka style in early colonial times; it possesses the distinctive features of royalty also present in the few surviving pre-Hispanic examples of its kind. R. Tom Zuidema describes the second tunic's background color as "blue or purple." It features an elaborate ahuaqui yoke design, a red field within a border that consists of squares filled with seven kinds of tucapus. The two felines, each a mirror image of the other, within the border and close to the neckline, are another indication of Andean royalty, as were the many "extra" designs that would not be present on the tunic (or drinking vessel, for that matter) of an ordinary person.

These extras seem set off by a wide waistband of many differently colored rows of tucapus running diagonally, acting as a frame. Beneath the waistband are two rows of six crowns or royal headgear, each with its three intricate parts (two feathers or a small scepter, above a square golden plaque, and a lower fringe). Five of the crowns in each row have red fringes, while one is yellow. Two sixteenth-century chroniclers, Pedro Cieza de León and Martín de Murúa, claimed that each red thread in this lower fringe represented one of the Inka's enemies slain in battle. And El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, writing in the early seventeenth century, informs us that an Inkaic crown prince wore a yellow fringe to symbolize his status as an initiate and to indicate that he had not yet killed an enemy. Working constructively from these fragments of information, Zuidema suggests that the five red-fringed crowns in two rows in the lower half of the second uncu may relate to the two arrangements of five trophy heads to either side of the ahuaqui yoke in the royal tunic's upper half. "Thinking of the probable use of this uncu," Zuidema writes, "I propose that the ten red masca paychas on each side represented the ten *panacas* [lineage branches of the Inka nobility] of the organization of Cusco and the two yellow ones the noble initiates at the time of Capac raymi."

When the Spaniards arrived in Peru and began to investigate Inkaic and non-Inkaic Andean societies, perhaps their most repeated early impression concerned the Andeans' apparent lack of a written language. Yet a more expansive definition of what "written" communication might be would allow room not only for the sophisticated pictographic expression of Mesoamerican peoples but also for the iconography of Andean cultures. Zuidema writes of an expressive tradition of lordship in the Andes in which "the iconographic whole was the lord, including his royal paraphernalia, body decorations, and tunic." Spanish Christians would bring an array of powerful symbols of prestige and messages of lineage and authority on their persons and in their creations, but such symbols and messages arrived in lands already

exquisitely familiar with such means of expression and expectation. To employ a phrase that Zuidema himself borrows from Roland Barthes, the Inka's "written garments" in the years before the Spanish arrival are but one example of a means through which the rulers of a vast and dynamic pre-Hispanic Andean state could communicate alliance and distinctions, and political and social hierarchy, as well as ritual roles.