

# Wari Women from Huarmey

Bioarchaeological Interpretation  
of Human Remains from the Wari Elite Mausoleum  
at Castillo de Huarmey, Peru

Wiesław Więckowski



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Cover image: fragment of the Middle Horizon pottery with a depiction of human skull found at Castillo de Huarney (photo by R. Pimentel).

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## The Site and the Excavations

In 2010 a small Polish-Peruvian team of archaeologists, headed by Miłosz Giersz of the University of Warsaw, Poland, started archaeological research of a site located ca. 1 km east from the main town square of Huarmey, known as Castillo de Huarmey. The presence of Polish archaeologists in the area was not a matter of chance, however. Two neighbouring river valleys – Valle de Culebras and Valle de Huarmey had been the main focus of their research for almost ten years before they started the actual dig at Huarmey (Giersz and Prządka-Giersz 2018). To begin with, the extensive surveys and excavations in the small Valley of Culebras, located just north of the Huarmey Valley, were conducted. They contributed a lot of important information on the southern Moche border and on local development of archaeological knowledge. Over one hundred and fifty new archaeological sites were discovered and documented, reflecting a complex settlement pattern in the valley. The settlements were mainly remains of Moche (200 – 700 CE), the Wari culture (700 – 900 CE), Chimú (900 – 1470 CE) or Inka (1470 – 1532 CE). The southern Moche boundary, thought to be almost 100 km farther to the north, was ‘pushed’ southwards by the results of excavations at the site of Quillapampa in 2004. There, the remains of the Moche elite residence and of elite tombs were found (Giersz 2011). Excavations at the site of Ten Ten revealed that the presence of Chimú in this region was not as strong as previously thought. The presence of an independent political entity ruling the valley was proposed on the basis of architecture and material culture characteristics. This entity resisted the expansion of Chimú and only surrendered later to the Inka Empire, and during its development became one of the most important administrative and mercantile centres in the coast (Prządka-Giersz 2011).

The first Polish archaeological surveys in the Huarmey Valley took place in 2010. A series of non-destructive documenting techniques were exploited, among them kite aerial photogrammetry and geophysical survey, resulting in preparation of detailed maps and identification of future excavation areas (Bogacki *et al.* 2011). Thanks to the funding provided by a grant from the National Science Centre of Poland, a new multidisciplinary project was launched in 2010 – *Proyecto de Investigación Arqueológica Castillo de Huarmey* (hereafter referred to as PIACH), and full-time archaeological excavations as well as laboratory work started. The main focus of the research, and the main base for the project, was excavation and interpretation of the most prominent complex among the archaeological sites in the lower valley of the Huarmey river clustered around the Castillo – a huge adobe architectural complex, thought to be the most important pre-Hispanic site of the region. The excavations started simultaneously in several parts of the site, revealing Middle Horizon architecture and a funerary complex, as well as other remains dating both to the earlier and later periods. The culminating discovery, on which this work is based, took place in October 2012. The first known up-to-date untouched funerary context related to elites of the



Figure 1. Location of Huarney (map: J. Chyla).

Wari culture of the Middle Horizon was unearthed, bringing to light a plethora of unique artefacts and information. Soon after the disclosure of the discovery to the world (June 2013), it was also presented to the public at an exhibition at the Museo de Arte, Lima (MALI) and the preliminary results were published in the accompanying catalogue (Giersz and Pardo 2014).

## The site

The site of Castillo de Huarmey consists of a complex of several pre-Hispanic sites clustered around the main, most prominent, platform-like area formed with monumental adobe architecture placed on the rocky spur entering the valley from the north. The area of interest to PIACH covers the surface of ca. 45 hectares in total and comprises at least 17 hectares where remains of architecture and looted cemeteries are clearly distinguishable (Figure 2). In the areas where the remains cannot be seen on the surface, their existence below the ground was proved by means of non-invasive methods. The whole complex, albeit most probably multi-chronological, was also multifunctional, and included areas for public, domestic and ritual activities. It should be assumed that different parts functioned at different moments, but their general functions persisted over time (Giersz 2014).

The whole area is located about one kilometre east from the main square of the modern town of Huarmey, and about four kilometres inland from the Pacific Ocean shore. The town of Huarmey is the capital of the province bearing the same name and covering territorially two neighbouring valleys (Huarmey and Culebras) as well as the desert area to the south (stretching to the outskirts of Paramonga), all forming the coastal part of the Ancash region. The town can be reached by the Panamericana Norte, and the distance between the capital city of Peru – Lima and Huarmey is ca. 300 kilometres. The main part of the site is located less than 300 metres north from the local highway connecting Huarmey with the town of Aija, situated on the west slopes of the Cordillera Negra. Due to agricultural development, lower portions of the site are covered with farming fields, and only low raised platforms with remains of mudbrick architecture are clearly visible.

The main part of the complex is named *castillo* (a castle) for its impressive size and appearance. It has a form of a tall platform and towers over the surrounding agricultural land. It is bounded by desert mountains to the north and east, and farming fields to the south, and to the west there is a relatively deep and almost 500-metre wide ravine going north, which separates the Castillo area from the large archaeological complex of Pedregal, tentatively dated to the Early Horizon (Bonavia 1982; Więckowski *et al.*, in press). The ravine was probably dry in the past, but nowadays it has been converted into agricultural lands. The river flows ca. 800 metres south from the centre of the Castillo; although it must be noted that the term ‘flows’ is quite loosely adopted here, since the river is of a rather periodical nature. Nevertheless, in the times of El Niño phenomenon it may bring enough water and alluvial material to destroy vast areas – as proved in 2017, when most of the modern town of Huarmey was flooded overnight. The location of the main funerary complex is not accidental. Any building rising alone on the top of the rock would be visible from the distance, naturally becoming a focus for the people approaching through the valley, either from the east or from the west. The building would also be visible for the people arriving from the north – both



Figure 2. Area of PIACH investigations, showing immediate archaeological surroundings of the Castillo site. The mausoleum is located in area C2 (map: M. Giersz, J. Chyla)

through the dry ravines or along the hill ridges. This suggests a carefully premeditated and thoughtful selection of the place, chosen most probably to legitimise a newly established power in the region (Giersz 2017).

## **The excavations**

### ***History***

The site of Castillo de Huarmey had, until 2010, never been a subject of complex, planned and long-term archaeological research. However, specialists knew quite a lot about the site, mainly because a large part of the pre-Hispanic artefact collections appearing in the second half of the twentieth century at Lima antiquity markets came from the area.

The father of Peruvian archaeology – Julio C. Tello – visited the area in the late second decade of the twentieth century. His interest, soon followed by the actual journey and visit, was triggered by the peculiar artefacts that he had seen in Lima, and the information that they came from the area of the City of Huarmey. Due to many circumstances, instead of digging in the area of Castillo, Tello was forced to travel further east and started excavations at Chavin de Huantar, which eventually resulted in his interpretation of the Chavin culture and its significance for the cultural development of the Andean Area. A decade later another researcher, Egenio Yacovleff, inspired by Tello, visited the area and purchased a famous leather drum (now on display at the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú in Lima). After that initial interest, the area became rather forgotten for decades, and was known and visited apparently only by the local tomb-raiders (Giersz 2016).

In the late 1950s the interest rose slightly. Two other famous archaeologists – Ernesto Tabío and Duccio Bonavía – visited the area while performing a wider scale survey of the valley. In the 1960s a German archaeologist, Heinrich Ubbelholde-Doering, went to Huarmey, encouraged by Yoshitaro Amano (the founder and owner of the museum of his name in Lima), in order to obtain more artefacts for collections and exhibitions. The collection he gathered forms a large part of the South American collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich, although it has never been properly inventoried or published (Giersz 2016).

In the 1970s the natural forces triggered a new, albeit not initially professional, interest in the archaeological complex. On May 31st, 1970, a very strong earthquake struck the area, destroying the town of Huarmey (its former beauty and colonial architecture has survived only in photographs) and also the ancient complex of the Castillo. Apparently, this catastrophe revealed untouched pre-Colombian tombs, allowing tomb-raiders easy access to the artefacts. It seems that starting on that date, the Castillo became a Mecca for clandestine diggers – *huaqueros* (Giersz 2018).

Later, in 1979 a Peruvian archaeologist – Frédéric André Engel – visited the site; he made sketches and took photos showing the site of the Castillo heavily transformed by the illegal excavations. As a result, his companion – Alberto Bueno Mendoza – published an article about the problem of *huaquería*. In the same year an American archeologist – William Conklin – published results of his analysis of the textiles from Museo Amano and, on the basis of the study of the techniques and iconography, interpreted the Castillo as a Middle Horizon site under a strong influence of the Moche culture (after Giersz 2016). A decade and a half later, a German archaeologist, Heiko Prümers, attempted to launch excavations of the main part of the site. Due to some problems, he was able only to clear a few looted tombs, recovering fragments and remains of the original grave goods, and to analyse textile fragments. The results formed the core of his PhD thesis defended in 1989 and provided material for a few later works (Prümers 2001). He coined the term Wari-Moche to describe the style of the iconography present on the textiles found at Huarmey. This view was later challenged and discussed by researchers associated with the newly established Polish-Peruvian project – PIACH.

### ***PIACH investigations***

*Proyecto de la Investigación Arqueológica Castillo de Huarmey* (PIACH), formed by a group of scientists from the University of Warsaw, Poland (UW) and the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru from Lima (PUCP), cooperating with scientists from the USA and Europe, and supported by several international institutions (among others Compañía Minera Antamina, National Geographic Society), started a long-term research project in 2010. The project from the beginning was led by Miłosz Giersz (UW) and Roberto Pimentel Nita (PUCP, UW), with Krzysztof Makowski (PUCP) as a scientific assessor.

First, in 2010, an archaeological survey of the site was performed. It included a variety of non-destructive methods of surveying – Global Positioning System (GPS) Real Time Kinetic (RTK) mapping to create a detailed and accurate map of the site and its vicinity, supported with the aerial kite photogrammetry. After that, large portions of the site were surveyed with caesium magnetometry to identify potential subterranean structures. The final stage was a complex spatial analysis of the distribution of artefacts and other remains within the area. All of the data obtained with these methods and approaches were combined using the Geographical Information Systems (GIS) database. As a result, a complex, multi-data set was compiled, recording not only geographical information, but also artefact distribution and other information necessary to prepare detailed and accurate 2-D and 3-D visualisations of the site, to aid in subsequent analysis and planning of future excavations (Bogacki *et al.* 2010). The non-destructive surveys were immediately followed with excavations just northeast from the top of the main structure – the *Castillo* – uncovering an almost completely looted mausoleum (only one subfloor burial was preserved intact), and an undisturbed burial of two young persons in a niche of the looted and partially damaged tomb on



the eastern slope of the platform. A wide and long trench uncovering the main façade and neighbouring palatial complex was also excavated in order to understand the relation between the elevated necropolis and the representative, palatial structure at the foot of the hill. These results proved that despite heavy looting the site preserved some intact contexts available for scientific research. In 2012 the first large scale excavations took place, uncovering archaeological remains in three different areas of the site – a small platform within the cultivated fields, a portion of the vast necropolis in a ravine situated to the north from the main part of the site, and atop the *Castillo* itself (Giersz 2017).

The excavations on the platform, located northwest from the main monumental part of the *Castillo*, unearthed an Early Horizon cemetery. It was covered with later natural and anthropogenic layers, and finally by the platform itself which was bordered with mudbrick walls; currently considered to be dated back to the Middle Horizon. The excavated portion of the cemetery consisted of nineteen intact burial contexts, among them one of sub-recent origin and one secondary, but most probably recently disturbed, bone deposition (Figure 3, units 7 and 10). 18 Early Horizon burials held 21 individuals (secondary burial included) deposited mostly as single interments. One grave, however, housed remains of four individuals – one infant and three adults – along with material culture artefacts – a well-preserved Early Horizon style stirrup spout bottle, a stone mortar and a shell container filled with a red pigment (hematite or cinnabar). Four burials differed considerably from an otherwise clear and defined burial pattern, which was in most cases consistent with other similarly dated burial sites known from the north and south of the Andes. The *deviant* nature of these four burials was derived from their occupants' individual life stories that lay at the foundation of the different post-mortem body treatment and funerary rites employed (Więckowski *et al.*, in press).

The excavations in the middle of the vast necropolis uncovered a fragment of a residential compound with relics of mud-covered reed walls and an animal enclosure dated to later periods. No new burial contexts were detected.

The third area of excavations, unit 8, was located in the highest portion of the sector with monumental mudbrick architecture (Figure 3). The initial plan of work involved cleaning the visible remains of mudbrick architecture from the destruction debris and was aimed especially towards the identification of the layout and function of the building with walls covered with red-painted mud plaster. Removal of the debris and modern trash soon revealed an orthogonal plan of the monumental building. Its outer walls were mud-plastered and painted red. The plan showed an almost symmetrical set of small chambers clustered around a large room, where the longer walls had two deep niches each. In the middle of the floor there was a bench-like structure. The floor was preserved in a large part; only a few shallow pits dug by looters showed a layer of stone and thick gravel beneath (Giersz 2014). The removal of the gravel unveiled

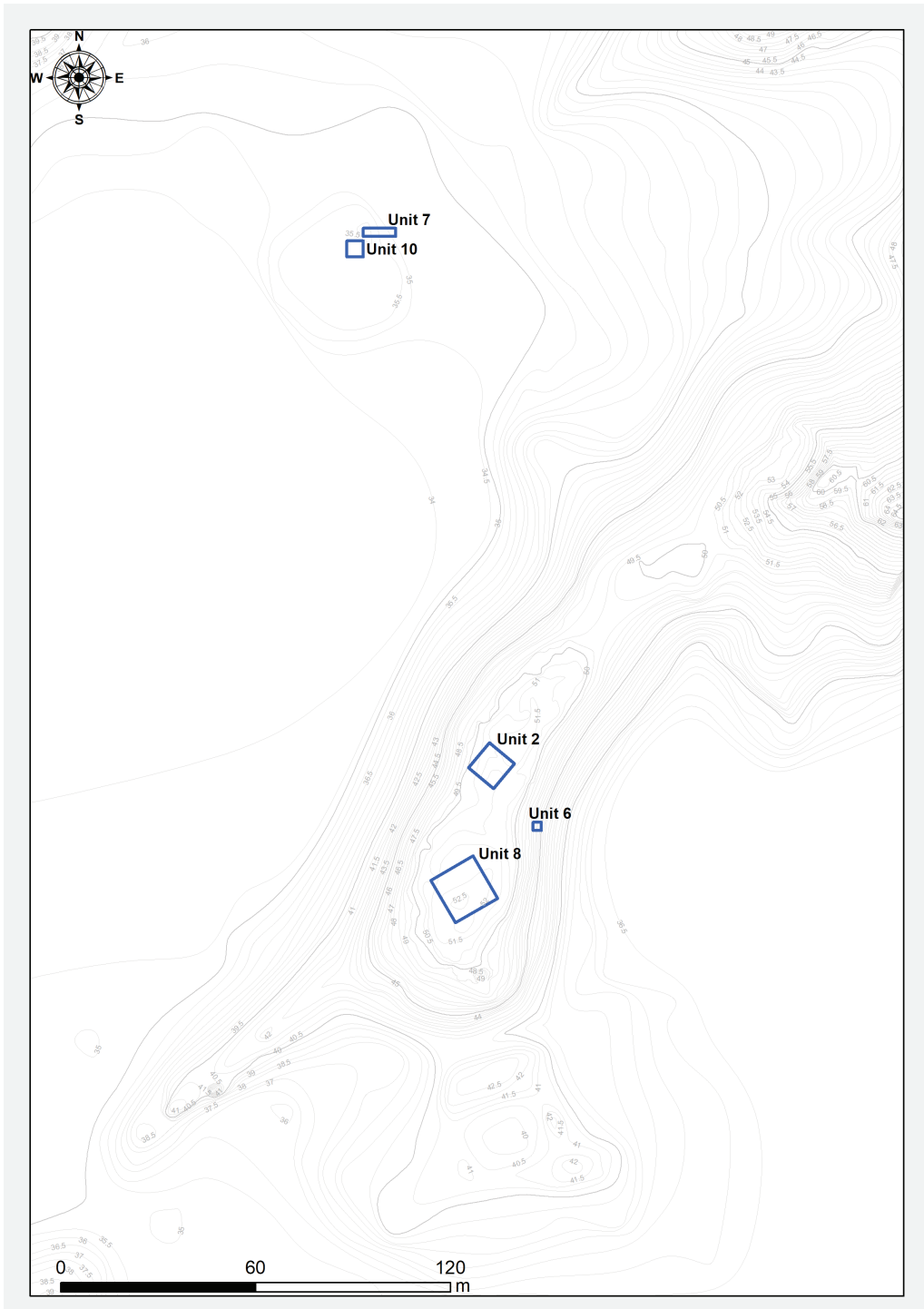


Figure 3. Location of excavation areas – units. The burial context – main elite mausoleum – is located within the borders of Unid 8, and surroundings (map: M. Giersz, J. Chyla).

a well-preserved multiple burial from the Middle Horizon. There were 64 skeletons discovered (Więckowski 2014) most associated with rich grave goods (Prządka-Giersz 2014).

The subsequent excavations performed in 2013 within the perimeter of the mausoleum revealed further intact burial contexts. There were two individuals buried to the east of the main burial chamber, under the floor of what originally served as an antechamber, later remodelled and divided into a series of small rooms. To the west a series of four enwalled depressions were found under the floor, holding secondary burials of at least five different individuals (Giersz 2014, Więckowski 2014). The presentation of the discovery to the public also took place in 2013. The main event took place on June 23rd at the site, and with accompanying publicity from many world media agencies. The opening of the exhibition at the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI), where it remained on display from March 26th until September 7th, 2014, followed this event.

The seasons of 2014 and 2015 were dedicated to a comprehensive examination of the area around the main mausoleum compound and to the archaeological, chronological and stratigraphic analyses of the central part of the site, accompanied with architectural survey and a lot of conservatory work, including the 3D scanning of the site for further research. Later, in 2016-18 the main focus of the research moved to the north and south from the central part with the mausoleum. In the north, the excavations concentrated in the area of the border of the mudbrick and stone architecture in order to understand the sequence of architectural phases, as well as to verify if the site was occupied more recently. In the south, the research and excavation at the palatial complex were pursued. A large portion of the northern wall and northwestern part of the patio was unearthed, followed by digging a test-pit in the place of the modern damage of the floor structure.

All of the excavation and conservation work of PIACH is continuously accompanied by intensive laboratory work. That includes all forms of the post-excavation processing of the material and storage. The textiles and pottery have been cleaned and the process of their analyses has begun and is ongoing to this day. The ceramics have been washed and various specialists in technology, techniques and iconography still perform their analyses. Both animal and human bones were analysed macroscopically, and multiple samples were collected for further, more sophisticated, bio-geo-archaeological analyses in various laboratories.

In December 2017, an exhibition on the discovery of the Wari imperial mausoleum presented in the wider archaeological context of the Andes opened to the public at the State Ethnographical Museum (Państwowe Muzeum Etnograficzne) in Warsaw, Poland. A very successful presentation of the work of Polish and Peruvian archaeologists was followed in May 2018 by the publication of a very extensive catalogue (Giersz and Prządka-Giersz 2018).