

# Chachapoya Mummies from the Laguna Huayabamba

Kenneth C. Nystrom

Anthropology and Sociology Department Santa Clara University Santa Clara, CA 95053

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## Abstract

**Beyond the material recovered from the laguna de los Cóndores by Dr. Sonia Guillén and Adriana von Hagen, the nature of Chachapoya mortuary ritual and body processing techniques has rarely been described. This paper reports on another Chachapoya site that contained mummified remains, the Laguna Huayabamba. Located near the modern town of Uchucmarca, the Laguna Huayabamba consists of a large residential sector and a cliff-side funerary complex. The mummified and skeletal remains described here were recovered from a single tomb. The remains represent approximately 48 individuals including (1) mummy bundles with varying degrees of preservation, (2) disarticulated crania, and (3) primary interments. Textile samples taken from one of the mummy bundles have been radiocarbon dated to 1100 AD, well before the 1472 AD Inka invasion of the region. This paper presents new data on Chachapoya body processing techniques and explores some of the implications for our understanding of mortuary ritual.**

## Introduction

The people referred to ethnohistorically as the Chachapoya occupied the cloud forests of the eastern Andean watershed in the northern highlands of Perú (Fig. 1). Despite a long history of exploration and anthropological attention (Bandelier, 1907; Church, 1996, 1997; Church and Morales, 2001; Guillén, 1998; Kauffmann, 2002; Kauffmann et al., 1989; Langlois, 1934, 1940; Morales, 2002; Morales et al., 2002; Muscutt, 2003; Muscutt et al., 1994; Narvaez, 1987; Reichlen and Reichlen, 1950; Schjellerup, 1992, 1997; Urton, 2001; von

Hagen, 2002) the place that the Chachapoya culture and region played within the broader Andean context still remains relatively unknown. This research focuses on the Laguna Huayabamba, a mortuary site dated to the Late Chachapoya period (ca. AD 1100–AD 1470).

## Laguna Huayabamba Site Description

The archaeological site of Vira Vira is in the Departamento San Martín, between the headwaters of the Ríos Huayabamba and Tatora (Fig. 1), set around the Laguna Huayabamba. The site consists of two components; (1) a residential set on the south side of the Laguna Huayabamba, on the summit of a north facing slope and (2) a funerary component.

The architecture observed at the residential sector consist of the round structure commonly associated with Chachapoya sites (Schjellerup, 1997; von Hagen, 2002). Though the Laguna Huayabamba and Vira Vira lies on the purported route of the conquering Inka, there were no indications of an Inka presence at the site (Lee, 1994).

The tomb in which Muscutt and colleagues recovered the human remains was but one of several on the cliff face.

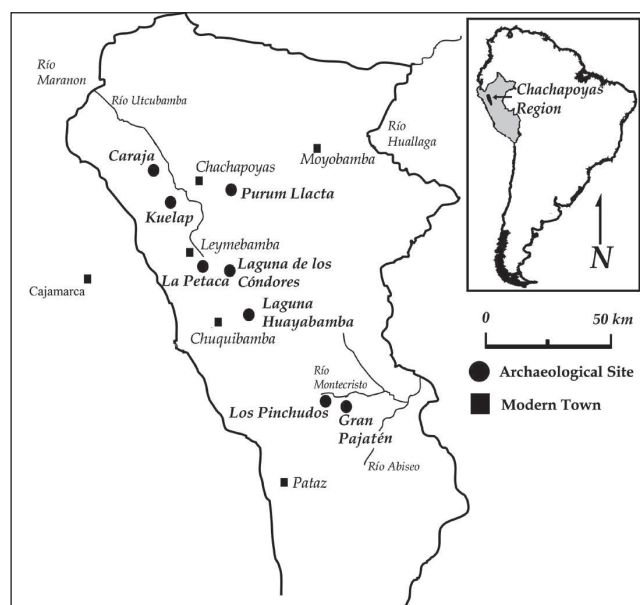


Fig. 1 - Map of the Chachapoya region.

Approximately 5 m above the ground, the tomb was enclosed by a masonry stone wall and contained the remains of approximately 48 individuals, present as both intact mummy bundles, and disarticulated skeletal remains. Radiocarbon analysis of textile fibers from one of the mummy bundles yielded a date to ca. AD 1000 – AD 1150 (Muscutt, 2003), placing it in the Late Chachapoya period, well before the AD 1472 Inka conquest.

### Sample description

There are a total of 48 (Tab. 1), both skeletal and mummified, individuals in the whole sample. Given the number of individuals that retained significant amounts of soft tissue or were wrapped as mummy bundles, there are a number of adults with indeterminate sex ( $n = 7$ ). There were also a large number of subadult remains recovered ( $n = 13$ ).

	0 – 19	20 – 34	35 – 50	50+ years	“Adult”	TOTAL
Male	0	5	5	2	2	14
Female	0	4	2	3	4	13
Indet.	13	1	0	0	7	21
TOTAL	13	10	7	5	13	48

Table 1 - Age/Sex distribution for the Laguna Huayabamba collection ( $n = 48$ ).

### Mortuary treatment

#### Mummy bundles

There are 17 individuals that are, or were, wrapped in textiles. All of them appear to have been in a tightly flexed position. The position of the arms and the legs ranged from the former being between the chest and legs to being placed outside and wrapped around the legs. Wrappings ranged from *shicra* vegetal fiber cords, light beige colored woven textiles with series of parallel dark stripes with dark orange borders, a light tan and dark brown woven textiles, to raw cotton. Five of the individuals displayed the same type of external woven textile, consisting of a light beige textile with a series of vertical parallel darker brown stripes with a dark orange border. The most variable component seems to be the middle layers, which ranged from raw cotton, to a dark brown woven textile with stitched patterning, to a *shicra* vegetal cord sack.

There are two noteworthy variations on the above mentioned anatomical positioning and textiles. Both involve the insertion of either the hands (Fardo #9, Fig. 2A and 2B) or arms (Fardo #4: Fig. 3) into what amounts to textile sleeves or gloves. In the first example, the hands were wrapped in textiles and then the fingers were individually stitched together through the intervening textile, in effect producing a mitten. The second example seems to involve a similar process but with a significant difference. The hands, forearms, and possibly the arms, were wrapped in a dark brown woven textile, but the fingers were not stitched

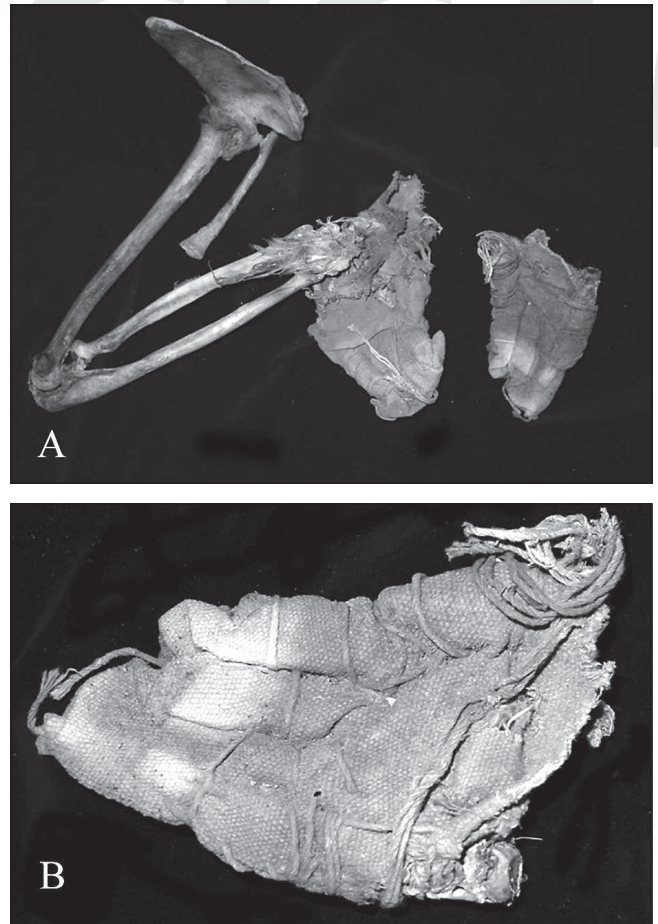


Fig. 2 - (A) Textile gloves from Fardo # 9 with (B) close-up of glove.

together through the material. Instead, this glove was then tied to a light brown hood that at one time appears to have completely covered the individual. Though not as well preserved, the same dark brown woven textiles remain attached to the right foot.

Given the condition of the majority of the mummy bundles, it is difficult to conclude with certainty if the individuals were eviscerated before they were wrapped in textiles. There was a single individual (Fardo #7) which appears to not have been eviscerated through the anus as has been noted in the mummies from the Laguna de los Cóncores (Guillén, 1998). Fardo #7 has a prolapsed rectum, which may be the result of the post-mortem buildup of intra-abdominal gases (Fig. 4). The remaining mummy bundles either suffered too much taphonomic damage or were still completely enveloped in textiles for an accurate assessment of evisceration.

#### Primary Interments

Children appear to have been placed at the funerary site with little or no postmortem processing. There are five newborn individuals that retain a significant portion of the skeleton which is still in articulation due the presence of soft tissue. Indeed, one individual appears to retain vestiges of internal thoracic organs, the only such example of visible internal organs within the sample. There is no evidence for the presence of textiles in association with these juveniles,

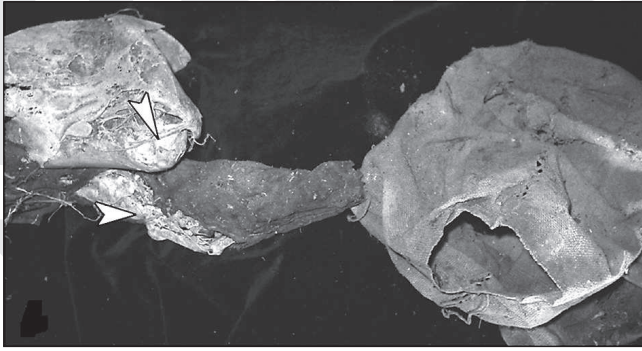


Fig. 3 - Textile sleeves and hood from Fardo #4 (White arrows are pointing towards head of the humerus and carpals).

nor is there any suggestion that they were wrapped at any point. This conclusion is suggested by the lack of any textile markings on the skin of several of these juveniles. These same textile markings are clearly visible on a number of the adult individuals.

#### Disarticulated crania

In addition to the mummy bundles described above, there were 10 crania that could not be positively associated with the remaining skeletal material and it is probable that they are the result of a secondary mortuary ritual. At present it is not possible to establish the temporal relationship between these remains and the above described mummy bundles and primary interments. The radiocarbon dates produced from the funerary component of the site were derived from textile samples taken from the mummy bundles. It is suggested that these isolated crania were the result of a secondary mortuary ritual.

#### Discussion

There are several possible scenarios concerning the relationship between the different forms of mortuary treatments evident at the Laguna Huayabamba. These possibilities must at this time remain speculative, for despite the overall remarkable preservation, there was a considerable amount of disruption to both context and material. Firstly, we have to consider that the different burial treatments may be separate and distinct in time. This would assume that each treatment category is relatively fixed and that the remains were not manipulated by later generations. Alternatively, it is distinctly possible that there exists a single mortuary treatment, perhaps mummification, but what is archaeologically visible merely represents the vestiges. Continued access to the ancestors appears to be a common theme in Chachapoya mortuary behavior (Nystrom, 2005) and it is likely that older remains may have been moved and manipulated during more recent funerary events. Another possibility is that the mortuary treatments are contemporaneous. If this is the case, the different mortuary treatments could represent: (1) different treatment based upon socioeconomic rank or (2) different stages within a more unified mortuary ritual. While it has been suggested



Fig. 4 - The arrow points towards a possible prolapsed rectum evident for one of the Laguna Huayabamba mummies.

that burial in *chullpas* was reserved for elite members of society (Vreeland and Cockburn, 1980), this has not been unequivocally established. If we are to assume for the sake of speculation, however, that the mummy bundles are members of an elite social class that are several points of interest in the Laguna Huayabamba. Most notable and suggestive, is the fact that five mummy bundles displayed nearly identical outer textiles based upon color and pattern. While this may be taken to be evidence for an elite class of individuals, it is equally likely that it is evidence of a kin-based utilization of a tomb. Further, there appears to be no discernible pattern to age and sex distribution among the mummified individuals, and there are no juveniles represented in this mortuary treatment category. If socioeconomic rank was ascribed, we might expect to find juvenile individuals accorded mummification.

The co-existence of mummies and bones at the Laguna Huayabamba carry powerful implications concerning the conception of the ancestors. Secondary mortuary rituals emphasize and strengthen the identity of the group, cross-cutting household or family lines, bringing the populace together in which common symbols reinforce group identity over personal identity (Kuijt, 2000). On the other hand, mummies may be able to retain a personal identity. The inclusion of both forms of treatment at Huayabamba could suggest that perhaps ancestors could take different forms (Buikstra and Nystrom, 2003); one a more anonymous ancestor that may result from secondary interment, while the other retains its identity due to mummification and the retention of flesh.

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