

REMNANT OF SHAWL WITH IKAT PATTERNED CENTRAL PANEL FROM THE VIRU VALLEY, PERU.
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY.

A PRE-SPANISH PERUVIAN IKAT

By JUNIUS BIRD

IN 1931 the Needle and Bobbin Club published an excellent article by Mr. Charles F. Iklé titled "Ikat Technique and Dutch East Indian Ikats." In this, the ikat process of creating patterns on yarn prior to weaving is so graphically described that the present article can be limited to the description of a single example, without a discussion of the technique.¹

This particular fabric, in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History, was found in 1936 by Dr. Wendell C. Bennett on the surface of a looted cemetery at the Huaca de la Cruz in the Viru Valley, Peru. Because of the extreme rarity of ikats in existing collections of ancient Peruvian textiles, its merits description. The *huaca*, or mound where it was found, has yielded ceramics of the Gallinazo, Mochica and Tiahuanaco periods, but most textiles from the near-surface burials relate to the last named, and some may be even more recent, as a few Chimú and colonial potsherds have been found there. Though no absolute dates have been determined for the pre-Inca chronology of Peru, it is reasonable to assume that the specimen was made between 1200 and 1400 A.D.

As this is only the fourth example reported one would naturally conclude that ikats were very rare in Peru. This I believe will prove to be incorrect for a rather simple reason. Most of the existing collections of old Peruvian fabrics have been gathered by *huaqueros*, the professional treasure hunters. These men save only such items as can be readily sold, and are completely unaware of the technical value of certain pieces.

¹ In the ikat process, where the design and color are applied on the unwoven threads before weaving, the threads are mounted on a loom and tied together in groups. Then, following a prearranged pattern, they are wound in certain places with a fiber called *agel* and dipped into the dye, the parts protected with the wrapping remaining uncolored. After taking the threads out of the dye, the binding is removed and used again to cover such parts of the threads as have been colored in the first dyeing. The threads are dipped again so that when the binding is removed a second time the threads appear in two tones. This process is repeated for each additional color. Either the warp or the weft threads may be ikated, or sometimes, in a double ikat, both warp and weft are dyed. This is very rare. See Ikat Technique and Dutch East Indian Ikats, by Charles F. Iklé, THE BULLETIN OF THE NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB, Vol. XV, 1931, Nos. 1-2. [Ed.]

Among the textiles discarded by them in cemeteries near El Brujo in the Chicama Valley I have seen various ikat fragments. There are a number of other examples from the same site in the Rafael Larco Collection at Chiclin, so systematic excavation should yield more. Sr. Larco very kindly offered me the privilege of describing his specimens, but I have been unable to do this. They are, however, so nearly identical to the one found by Dr. Bennett that they must date from the same period.²

The Viru specimen is extremely fragmentary as can be seen in Plate 2. Fortunately, enough survived so that after the excellent restoration done by Mrs. N. B. Van Houten we can present the essential data.

Its size, 6 ft. 11¼ in. by 5 ft. 2 in., suggests that it may have been used as a shawl (Plate I). It was woven in five strips, then sewn together so that the warp runs on the short dimension of the finished piece. Fine, hard-twist, single-ply cotton yarn was used for both warp and weft, with the warp laid in pairs, 37 warp pairs by 23 weft per inch. The end strips, 12½ in. wide, each have eight stripes of a stepped grec, warp float pattern, using three shades of blue, reddish brown, dark and light brown, and white. In creating the central ikat unit the weaver planned the pattern repeats and prepared all of the warp at one time. After dyeing, they were divided into three sets and woven separately. It should be borne in mind that in making ikats the weaver must visualize the pattern, decide how many warps shall be utilized in it, how many subdivisions must be made to be dyed separately, multiply this number by the number of pattern rows and then add whatever number of warps are needed for spacing the pattern. The symmetry of the finished product depends on how correctly these mathematical calculations have been conceived and executed. In this particular specimen, several errors are apparent. The pattern row as visualized (Plate II), consisted of a human figure, a series of four birds, probably the Cayenne Ibis, each pecking at a fish (?), a second human figure, four more birds, and ending with a third human figure. Plate III shows the human and bird figures as laid out in the 28 groups of warp. On alternate rows this scheme is shifted along the warps. Five repeats of both pattern rows were planned, each with twenty-eight subdivisions for dyeing. In the subdivisions, or elements, eight pairs of warps were used, so the total number of warp pairs should have been 2,240 plus a multiple of 11 for spacers and borders. Actually, 2,384 pairs were

² Since this was written, Sr. Larco reports that from a grave found at El Brujo he has one ikat fabric associated with a glass trade bead demonstrating the presence of the technique in early Colonial times.



PLATE II
DETAILS OF THE PATTERN ROW.

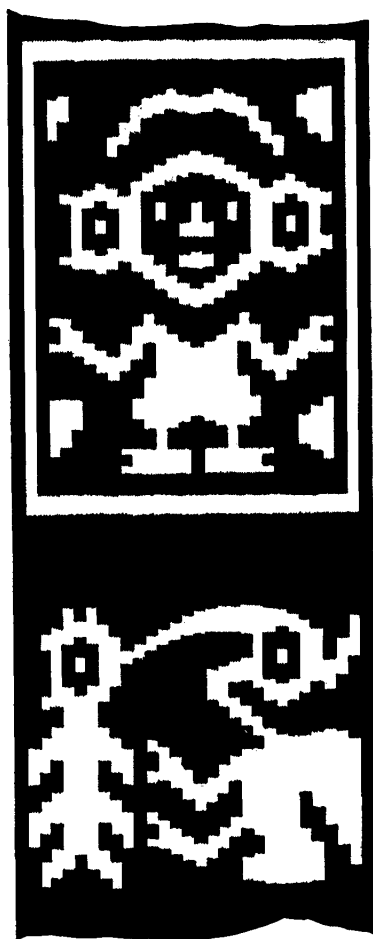


PLATE III
DIAGRAM OF THE FIGURES DYED ON THE WARP PRIOR TO THEIR WEAVING.
MINOR VARIATIONS OCCUR IN THEIR APPLICATION.

warped, showing either that the weaver miscalculated, or that the final width of the fabric was more important than symmetry.

In separating the total warp into the two sets of subdivisions preparatory to making the resist ties and dyeing, one group of eight pairs was misplaced, so that one finished pattern row has twenty-nine elements, and the succeeding repeat has twenty-seven. A total of 104 warp pairs were dyed without resist, for spacers and borders, leaving forty more which were laid in with the first five units of one of the patterns. After the resist ties were on, the fifty-seven groups of warps were dyed brown. For weaving, as mentioned, the warps were assembled into three sets, the side selvages cutting through pattern rows. The five elements of the incomplete row were warped in sequence. The spacers were irregularly grouped in sets of eight and sixteen.

As was customary in Peru, the weft was carried the full length of the warp, producing finished warp-end selvages. The three pieces came off the loom perfectly matched for length and pattern alignment. The irregularity of the ikated figures suggest that the tying of the resist, rather than the subsequent handling of the warp, was at fault.

After the three strips were sewn together, blue and red dyes were painted haphazardly over various parts of the ikated figures. This, from our point of view, added nothing to its esthetic value. If it was done in an attempt to create the effect of a polychrome ikat it was a technical mistake for the result obscures the pattern.

One feature of this fabric and the others seen, the use of paired singly warps, should be emphasized. Archaeological evidence shows this to have been very common among plain weavers in this region at least several centuries prior to 1100 A.D. It is a type of construction not really suitable for ikats. The fact that it was used, plus the construction errors mentioned, and the painted dye used, suggest certain conclusions: that ikating was not traditional in this area; that it was a fully developed creative art elsewhere at this time and was copied in northern Peru without complete understanding of the problems involved in producing a good ikat.

Published references to ancient Peruvian Ikats:

- P. August Dressen, *Nederlandsch Indie Oud en Nieu*, 1930/31, 15 Jaargang, aflevering 3, page 66.
- Raoul d'Harcourt, *Les Textiles Anciens du Perou et leurs Techniques*, Paris, 1934, page 136, Plate LI.
- E. Heinrich Snethlage, *Ein figürliches Ikat-Gewebe aus Peru*, in *Der Weltkreis*, 1931. Heft 3-4, pages 49-51.