

POSSIBLE SYMBOLS OF STATUS OR AUTHORITY AMONG THE WARI

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, we examine a complex circular symbol identified on a variety of Wari objects. Variations of the circular symbol are displayed on a large Y-shaped ornament and on multiple circular pectorals recovered at the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa. Moreover, these symbols are also found on other circular pectorals recovered at various sites across the Wari realm and on Wari objects held in museums. We propose that the circular symbol found on these objects speaks to the institutionalization of status or authority for those who wore them. In other words, these objects, with their recurring motifs, may represent politically or religiously charged items, used to designate specific, high-standing officials among the Wari.

The Andean Middle Horizon (AD 600–1000) was marked by the seemingly simultaneous emergence of two highland states: the Wari in the Ayacucho region of Peru and the Tiwanaku in the Lake Titicaca region of Bolivia.¹ These two states were heavily invested in an ancient, shared cosmology which resulted in similar iconographic traditions (now referred

to by some as the “Southern Andean Iconographic Series” [Isbell *et al.* 2018]). Two types of supernatural beings were at the center of that cosmology: the forward facing Staff God, called such because it holds “staffs” in each hand, and the kneeling or running Profile Deities, which appear to be attendant and subservient to the Staff God (Figure 1). The combination of a central figure with flanking profile figures, is evident in monumental stonework (most notable at the site of Tiwanaku) and in high-end ceramics (Cook 1983; 2012). However, these figures are also found individually on a wide range of artifacts made of other materials such as silver, gold, wood, feather, shell, and textiles (Bergh 2012a; Isbell *et al.* 2018). Among Andean scholars, there is a general agreement that this shared cosmology was accepted and promoted by the elites of both Tiwanaku and Wari, and, as such, it was used to support their privileged positions.

In this article, we identify a separate set of symbols, initially recognized at the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa (Cusco Region, Peru), which appears to operate independent of the aforementioned religious tradition. Comprising an intricate arrangement of orbiting circles, these symbols are found on two large Y-shaped silver ornaments mixed with more familiar iconographic elements. Additionally, they are found

¹ This article builds on information initially presented in Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer (2019) and Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer (2020).

on thirteen circular silver pectorals (or their representations) recovered from various non-coastal Wari sites. The identification of numerous pectorals bearing similar symbols across the known territories of the Wari suggests that their usage was not tied to local traditions. Furthermore, their creation in an uncommon and likely highly valued material (silver), suggests that they bestowed an elevated status on the wearer. We posit that the use of these well-crafted objects featuring similar motifs, marked their wearers as high-status holders within Wari society. Consequently, it is plausible they even denoted specific offices or social positions held by the wearers, positions through which they obtained authority.

THE WARI SITE OF ESPÍRITU PAMPA

The Wari site of Espíritu Pampa was initially identified in 2010 as a result of excavations led by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz (2011), funded by the Peruvian Ministry of Culture (Cusco).² Situated in the low-lying Vilcabamba region (at approximately 1,500 masl), the site is some 110 kilometers southeast of the Wari capital. Over the course of three seasons (2010–2012), excavations revealed an impressive complex that included at least three D-shaped structures around a central patio. Most notable was the discovery of many burials and offerings that contained a wide range of gold, silver, and bronze items (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer

2020). Drawing international attention, the most prominent individual buried at the site has become known as the Lord of Vilcabamba. This high-status individual, one of the most prominent to be found at any Wari site, was interred with a large silver Y-shaped ornament (Figure 2) and a host of other high value objects.

Besides including a large Y-shaped ornament, the principal burial at the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa contained a life-size silver mask, two wide gold wristbands, fourteen silver sequins showing feline faces in profile, along with numerous oval silver sequins and greenstone beads. The occupant was also interred with an elaborate axe and staff. The axe blade is made from an unusual combination of copper, silver, tin, and gold. Given that the primary sources of tin in the Andes are concentrated in the Lake Titicaca region and further south (Lechtman 2005), the axe blade may represent an imported item, potentially crafted at Tiwanaku (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:154–155). Of particular significance to this study, the Y-shaped ornament, the two broad wristbands, and the sequins are decorated with embossed feline faces with rounded noses, depicted in profile. These are images long associated with Wari and Tiwanaku religious iconography (Figures 3 and 4).

Y-SHAPED ORNAMENTS AT ESPÍRITU PAMPA AND ELSEWHERE

The large silver Y-shaped ornament found in the principal burial of the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa is an extraordinary artifact (Fonseca Santa Cruz 2011; Isbell 2016). Each arm of the ornament extends outwards and features round-nosed feline heads in profile (Figure 5). The interior border of the ornament features ten simple, embossed circles. Three thread holes are at the base of the Y. There are two pairs of step frets at the mid-section of the pectoral, which have undergone repairs to protect the delicate

² The community of Espíritu Pampa is located within the district of Vilcabamba (La Convención, Cusco, Peru). There are two important archaeological sites adjacent to it. The best known is the former town of Vilcabamba, which was the center of Inca resistance until 1572 (Bauer *et al.* 2005). The second, newly discovered, site is that of the Wari occupation. It is located approximately one kilometer east of the Inca settlement (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020). Currently, there is no evidence to link the two sites, other than that they are both in the same valley.

sheet silver from cracking. The ornament ends in a striking crescent shape, reminiscent of Moche backflaps (Alva and Donnan 1993; Donnan 1975). Initially classified as a large pectoral (Fonseca Santa Cruz 2011; Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020), it is possible that this silver ornament was worn on the individual's back, as similar ornaments were used by Moche elite and mythical figures (Bruce Owen, personal communication, July 2023).

Whether the Y-shaped ornament was a pectoral or a Moche style backflap, what is critical for this study is the presence of three intricate embossed circular motifs beneath each of the two feline heads. These motifs run along the outer perimeter of the ornament and comprise a central circle surrounded by eight orbiting circles. As will be discussed, these elaborate designs match the boss designs displayed on various circular pectorals unearthed not only at Espíritu Pampa but at various highland Wari sites.

The Linden Museum in Stuttgart, Germany, contains a large silver Y-shaped ornament very similar to the one found at Espíritu Pampa (Bergh 2012b:227–229; Isbell 2016:72, figure 25). The Linden Museum piece also displays feline heads in profile, rectangular bands separating the feline heads from the rest of the pectoral, simple embossed circles bordering the collar (seven rather than ten), pairs of step frets, and a crescent-shaped base. The Linden Museum Y-shaped ornament also contains three sets of intricate embossed circle designs, composed of a central circle surrounded by eight orbiting circles, three sets along each exterior side (Figure 6).

Furthermore, the Linden Museum houses two miniature silver Y-shaped ornaments (Figure 7), which, despite having been folded and damaged, clearly represent scaled-down versions of the larger example also held at the museum.

They, too, contain three orbiting circular designs along their exterior edges.³

Excavations at the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa also revealed more than forty other burials/offerings, many containing high quality metal artifacts (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020). Among the most exceptional objects recovered are five silver circular pectorals that feature symbols akin to those seen on the Y-shaped ornaments and are distinctly different from other motifs associated with the Wari and Tiwanaku religious iconographic tradition.⁴ What is even more remarkable is that eight additional circular pectorals, or images of them, with similar sets of embossed orbiting circles designs have been recovered at different locations across the former Wari territories. The similarities of these pectorals, coupled with their distribution across Wari-controlled areas of the Andes, suggest that they were widely recognized, institution-based, emblems.

CIRCULAR PECTORALS FEATURING ORBITING CIRCLE DESIGNS FROM ESPÍRITU PAMPA

Excavations in five different contexts within Espíritu Pampa have unearthed a collection of silver circular pectorals. These disks have more elaborate, but similar, orbiting circular designs as seen on the Y-shaped ornaments.⁵ As will be

³ Considering the presence of numerous looted burials at Espíritu Pampa, it is conceivable that the Linden Museum pectorals also came from that location.

⁴ Several non-circular silver pectorals were also found at the site (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020). Although they certainly marked other elite individuals, these pectorals are not described here, since multiple examples of similarly styled pectorals have not been recovered at other Wari sites.

⁵ We originally reported that six silver circular pectorals were recovered at Espíritu Pampa. We have reduced that number to five here, removing a badly fragmented object whose shape is now considered undetermined.

discussed in more detail below, we know that these disks were pectorals, because there is a stone figurine in the Larco Museum which depicts a figure wearing one on its chest.

The first circular pectoral (EP 2010-82) was discovered in a disturbed context, accompanied by a necklace composed of nineteen silver thimble-shaped beads (Figure 8). This pectoral is about 26 centimeters in diameter (Figure 9). A single row of 35 raised circles adorns the outer rim of the disk. These circles exhibit slight variations in size and placement, hinting that a specific number may have been required (Bruce Owen, personal communication, July 2023). The center of the pectoral showcases an intricate boss, featuring a flat-to-concave circle with eight smaller embossed orbiting circles. A thick, wavy line spans the area between the rim and the boss, forming a captivating six-petal design that intertwines with twelve raised circles; six positioned within and six positioned outside of the petals. Two thread holes reveal how it was worn and the intended orientation of the designs.

The second silver circular pectoral (EP 2010-84) recovered at the site of Espiritu Pampa features a double row of 41 embossed circles along its perimeter, while the central boss displays a raised circle surrounded by seven orbiting circles (Figure 10). The pectoral measures about 29.5 centimeters across, and its central space is filled with a six-petal design similar to the one seen on pectoral EP 2010-82. The petal design on this pectoral is slightly more complex than that seen on pectoral EP 2010-82, intertwining six pairs of outer circles with six individual inner circles. The orientation of EP 2010-84 as indicated by its two thread holes, also differs slightly from EP 2010-82. A bronze *tupu* pin was found near this pectoral.

The third circular pectoral (EP 2010-65) from Espiritu Pampa is in a poor state of preser-

vation, yet several core design elements remain discernible (Figure 11). The pectoral differs from the two aforementioned ones in that the space between the border and the midpoint is decorated with a meandering-line design which weaves around a series of single circles. The central boss appears to have held a series of circles orbiting around a flat or convex central circle. Two sets of *tupu*, one crafted from silver and the other from bronze, were recovered within the same burial. Accompanying these objects was a silver circular two-plumed diadem pin, decorated with cutout sequins and small embossed circles on its rim (Figure 12).

The fourth and fifth circular pectorals (EP 2012-01, EP 2012-22) found at Espiritu Pampa measure between 21 and 23 centimeters and they each display central bosses and border circles. However, due to their poor state of preservation, it is difficult to tell the full range of designs that they once held. Pectoral EP 2012-01 contains two rows of embossed border circles and there are two rows of embossed circles orbiting what may be a flat or convex central circle on the boss (Figure 13). Pectoral EP 2012-22 shows evidence of once having two rows of raised border circles. A bronze axe head and a bronze spear-thrower hook were found within the same burial as pectoral EP 2012-22 (Figure 14).

Carbon recovered with pectoral EP 2012-01 offered a calibrated AMS date of AD 773–953 at 95.4% (Sample AA 106769, AD 711 ± 25 ¹⁴C) with a median probability of AD 838. A second carbon sample, recovered near pectoral EP 2012-22, yielded a calibrated AMS date of AD 689–887 at 95.4% (Sample AA 106770, AD 686 ± 28 ¹⁴C) with a median probability of AD 823.⁶

⁶ Radiocarbon dates in this article were calibrated with Calib 8.2 (Stuiver and Reimer 1993) using a Southern Hemisphere Atmospheric Curve (Hogg *et al.* 2020).

These two, overlapping results fall within the widely accepted dates of Wari expansion and may suggest that the pectorals were made during the time span of one or two generations.⁷

SILVER CIRCULAR PECTORALS WITH ORBITING CIRCLES DESIGNS FROM ELSEWHERE IN THE WARI REALM

The silver circular pectorals discovered at Espíritu Pampa exhibit a striking degree of similarity. These artifacts share distinctive characteristics, such as possessing one or two rows of embossed circles delineating their borders, and they showcase intricate designs of embossed circles orbiting a central circle. They also contain a thick embossed line that takes the form of either a “petal” or a “meandering-line” design, which interweaves a series of raised circles. Notably, this core set of attributes also finds representation in six, perhaps eight, other pectorals found in different locations within the Wari realm. For instance, an article published on 12 December 2012, in the newspaper *Ahora* (distributed in Amazonas and Cajamarca) reported the discovery of a silver circular pectoral, accompanied by seven large obsidian bifaces that are characteristic of the Wari culture (Isbell 2016:76), at the Santuario Nacional Cordillera de Colán in Amazonas, Peru. The border of the Colan disk is adorned with a solitary row of 25 embossed circles, while its center is marked by seven embossed circles encircling a central, concave or flat, circle (Figure 15). This pectoral also features a thick, embossed line, forming a five-petal design reminiscent of, albeit slightly more angular than, the six-petal designs observed in the Espíritu Pampa examples. There are sets of two embossed circles between the petals, but unlike the two Espíritu Pampa petal-style pectorals, there are no embossed circles

within the petals. There are also two thread holes which indicate how the pectoral was worn.

In the mid-1980s, another silver circular pectoral was found by looters in the district of Pomacanchi (Acomayo, Cusco Department) along with a remarkable collection of ornate silver *tupus* and other items (Chávez 1985, 1987). Despite the disk’s poor state of preservation, we can see that its border featured at least one row of embossed circles, and its boss exhibited seven raised circles orbiting a central raised circle. The disk presented remnants of a meandering-line design which weaves around a series of embossed circles (Figure 16). Subsequent findings in recent years at the site of K’ullupata in Pomacanchi, offer suggestions that this location may have originally held the pilfered artifacts and that this large Wari occupation site held at least one elite burial (Espinoza Martínez 2019).

Expanding our inventory, the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú in Lima holds another example of a meandering-line design pectoral (Figure 17). This is the largest (31 centimeters in diameter) and the most elaborate of the pectorals so far identified. It contains a double row of 52 embossed circles around its border and its center contains two sets of nested embossed circles, the exterior containing 11 and the interior containing 7, orbiting a larger circle. The meandering-line design, weaves around a series of embossed circles. Unfortunately, there is no information about where this object was found.

Another Wari circular pectoral was recovered in 2017 at the summit of Cerro Ilucán near the town of Cutervo in Cajamarca along with nearly 90 other silver and gold objects (Bauer 2024). The pectoral is the smallest example so far identified, measuring approximately 16 centimeters across, but it is also one of the best-preserved. The border is marked by a lone row

⁷ For the full suite of dates that have been recovered at the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa see Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer (2020:14–15, 197).

of 26 embossed circles, while its center contains 8 embossed circles orbiting a flat central circle. The region between the border and the boss is decorated with a meandering-line design, which winds its way around 8 embossed circles. The pectoral also contains 2 thread holes indicating how the object would have been worn (Figure 18).

Most recently, another silver circular pectoral was found in the vicinity of the town of Santa Rosa (La Mar, Ayacucho) which is located along the Apurímac River, between Ayacucho and Espíritu Pampa. Although little information is currently available regarding the circumstances of this find, the fragmented remains show that the outer edge of the pectoral features a single row of embossed circles, and that the central boss hosts 11 embossed circles orbiting around the central, flat-surfaced, circle (Lidio Valdez, personal communication, 2020). The area between the border and the boss is adorned with a meandering-line design. The pectoral appears to have been unearthed along with two other metal disks, which could potentially be the outer components of ear ornaments (Figure 19).

We have also identified two museums that hold objects depicting Wari people with circular pectorals. The Houston Museum of Fine Arts contains two rectangular gold and shell artifacts depicting individuals wearing circular pectorals. The origin of these artifacts is unknown (Figure 20). One of the figures is portrayed in motion, appearing to run, whereas the other figure is shown standing, clutching a drinking vessel. Although the pectorals on these figures are not exact matches of those described above, they could potentially be stylized representations.

Most notably, within the Museo Larco in Lima, there is a standing stone figurine which wears a circular pectoral (Figure 21). This particular pectoral boasts a solitary row of 20

circles adorning its outer periphery, while its boss is defined by two concentric circles. The space between the ornamented edge of the disk and its central motif displays a meandering-line design that bears a striking resemblance to those described earlier. The figure wears the pectoral utilizing a double ribbon that encircles its neck, positioned in the same manner as the Cerro Ilucán pectoral. Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether the figure represents a human or a mythical creature. The record of this artifact indicates that it comes from the Cusco region. However, it is difficult to know how much weight should be placed on that information.

DISCUSSION

This article began with a brief overview of the religious iconography of the Andean Middle Horizon associated with both Wari and Tiwanaku. Reflections of this religious iconography are evident on various items discovered within the principal burial of the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa. Among these artifacts are fourteen silver profile sequins, two broad gold wristbands, and a large silver Y-shaped ornament. The existence of such metalwork lends support to the prevailing scholarly consensus that the upper echelons of Wari society accepted and promoted a singular cosmology, and that its artistic tradition was replicated at the highest levels of craft production, much of which is believed to have been state controlled (Isbell *et al.* 2018; Owen 2010). It is posited that the burial likely contains the remains of a high-ranking individual within Wari society, potentially holding a role akin to that of a regional governor (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020; Isbell 2016). The assortment of the burial goods serves to underscore the intimate connection between Wari's state ideology and cosmology. The inclusion of a ceremonial axe within the burial assemblage could symbolize the more coercive powers of the state, effectively illustrat-

ing how religious and political power could be merged within a single, high-ranking, individual.

A closer examination of the Espíritu Pampa Y-shaped ornament highlighted the presence of a series of embossed symbols composed of eight circles orbiting a round a central circle. These same symbols are also displayed on another Y-shaped ornament along with two miniature Y-shaped ornaments, in the Linden Museum. Moreover, larger and more ornate renditions of these orbiting circles designs have also been found on a series of silver, circular pectorals recovered at different highland Wari sites. The site of Espíritu Pampa yielded no fewer than five silver circular pectorals featuring bosses adorned with circles orbiting a central circle (Table 1). Four additional silver circular pectorals have been recovered in the regions of Amazonas, Cajamarca, Cusco, and Ayacucho. An additional piece, of the same nature, is held in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia in Lima. These finds document the widespread use by the Wari of circular pectorals adorned with bosses that contain orbiting circles. Furthermore, two Wari figurines, also made of high value materials, can be seen wearing circular pectorals, and most importantly, a stone figurine has been identified that clearly wears a pectoral matching those described above.

The orbiting circles motif, as identified on the Y-shaped ornaments and as featured on the bosses of circular pectorals, diverges from the extensive body of Wari religious iconography. Similarly, no design elements resembling this motif are currently known within the Early Intermediate Period ceramics (Huarpa) nor in the Wari ceramic traditions of the Ayacucho region (Ochatoma Paracivino and Cabrera Romero 2022). Nevertheless, the carbon dates associated with two circular pectorals recovered at the site of Espíritu Pampa, are exceptionally close and fall well within the accepted dates of Wari expansion. The connection between

Wari's expansionist endeavors and the utilization of these pectorals correlates with the far flung distribution of these objects across much of the portion of the Peruvian highlands that fell under the control of the Wari. Considering the available dates and the recovery of these pectorals in numerous Wari contexts, it is possible that this distinctive design is derived from a yet to be defined Ayacucho-based aesthetic tradition and that the use of orbiting circle motifs traveled across the Andean highlands with the expansion of the Wari.

Gazing further afield, it is worth mentioning that while we have found no exact matches of orbiting circles on pectorals among Moche artifacts, there are various objects that do display these motifs. It is difficult to know, however, how much weight should be given to these parallels, since border circles, orbiting circles, and bosses are common artistic elements. Among the examples are a pair of silver ear ornaments in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1987.394.581; <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/315430>, accessed 4 March 2024) that are bordered by embossed circles reminiscent of the border edge decoration seen on the Wari pectorals (see Bergh 2012b:227–229). Moreover, as previously noted, the crescent-shaped ends of the Y-shaped ornaments bear a resemblance to Moche backflaps. This raises the possibility that the great metal-making traditions of the Moche and the North Coast of Peru influenced Wari metal production in the highlands, and provided inspiration for the orbiting circles design discussed in this work, or the reverse, depending on the exact timing.

There is also a circle silver pectoral held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1987.394.232; [Silver Disk Ornament | Ecuador | The Metropolitan Museum of Art \(metmuseum.org\)](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/315430), accessed 4 March 2024), perhaps originating from the Manteño Huanca-

velica tradition of Ecuador, that bears certain similarities to the Wari examples, featuring both border circles and orbiting circles at its boss (Bruce Owen, personal communication, July 2023). Unfortunately, little is known about this artifact and the similarities are broad enough that they might be coincidental.

While at least one of the circular pectorals described above was found alone (EP 2012-01), the majority appear to have been found in association with other prized objects. For example, at the site of Espíritu Pampa, one pectoral (EP 2010-84) was found with a bronze *tupu*, while another (EP 2010-65) was found with a pair of silver and a pair of bronze *tupus*, in addition to a circular two-plumed diadem. Throughout the Andean region, *tupus* are closely, albeit not universally, associated with women (Tung and Cook 2006).⁸ This raises the possibility that some of the individuals adorned with these disks may have been female.

Additional items have also been found with Wari circular pectorals, both at Espíritu Pampa and at various other pectoral-yielding sites. Within Espíritu Pampa, for instance, a pectoral (EP 2010-82) was found alongside a necklace comprised of nineteen silver, thimble-shaped beads. Another pectoral (EP 2012-22) was found with a bronze axe head and a bronze spear-thrower hook. While the circumstances surrounding the other pectorals are far more problematic, since they were recovered by looters, many of them also seem to have been found in association with other objects. For example, the Colán pectoral was found with eight large obsidian bifaces. The one from Santa

Rosa appears to have been found with two metal disks, and the Cerro Ilucán pectoral may have come from the same context that contained a large number of other silver objects (Bauer 2024). A similar scenario might apply to the Pomacanchi pectoral (Chávez 1985).

The observed variations within the circular pectorals themselves are also interesting. While they are all made of silver, they are not of uniform size, ranging in diameter from 16 centimeters to 31 centimeters. They also vary in their quality of artistic production, with the Colán pectoral ranking among the lowest and the Museo Nacional de Arqueología example among the highest. This hints at the absence of a single designated metal workshop solely responsible for producing and distributing these artifacts.

Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that while many of the circular pectoral designs are very similar, none are identical. This divergence suggests that some variation was acceptable (and perhaps even intentional). For example, the number of border rows, the number of border circles, and the number of orbiting circles vary across our sample. The central circles of the bosses also vary in terms of being flat, concave, or convex. Nonetheless, given the diverse contexts in which these pectorals have been found and the great distances that separate these discoveries, they are remarkably similar. This suggests to us that there were mental templates for their production and specific design arrangements were needed to render the symbols meaningful.

Perhaps most intriguing, while the pectorals share similar, although not identical, border circles and orbiting circles on their bosses, two different sub-styles of pectorals can be currently identified. One pectoral sub-style contains a “petal” design in the space between the border and the boss. The other sub-style contains a

⁸ Although little is known about the role of elite women among the Wari, recent discoveries at the Castillo de Huarmey have revealed the remains of women who were buried with impressive grave goods and sacrificed attendants (Giersz and Pardo 2014; Wieckowski 2019).

“meandering-line” design. While these two sub-styles are distinct, they do share similar features, including a thick embossed line that weaves in between embossed circles. One might even say these two sub-styles are variations on the same theme (Figure 22).

Examples of both the petal and the meandering line pectorals are found at Espíritu Pampa as well as other locations across Wari territory. The widespread distribution of these two sub-styles implies that they do not represent local or regional variations, but instead they represent two discrete sub-styles within the broader category of circular pectorals employed by the Wari. It can also be noted that there is not a gradual continuum or an extensive array of sub-styles. Rather, a distinct demarcation exists between the two sub-styles, petal and meandering-line, underscoring that they carried two distinct meanings for the Wari and are not the outcome of specific attributes or skills possessed by different metalworkers.

It is tempting to look at the distribution of known Wari circular pectorals and associate meaning with their recovery in the highland boundary areas of the empire (Figure 23). If the distribution is meaningful, it raises the idea that peripheral settlements established by the state may have necessitated a distinct form of authority, divergent from that used in the largest state centers, such as Huari, Pikillacta, and Viracochapampa. Alternatively, a chronological factor might be at play, with the circular pectorals being used during the later stages of Wari rule, as borders expanded and colonies were established. Furthermore, none of the pectorals are definitively known to come from the coast, where preservation is good. This observation could potentially align with suggestions posited by certain authors (Castillo Butters 2000, 2012) that the coastal polities maintained different relations with the Ayacucho state compared to the highland regions. Nonetheless, given the

extensive looting that has plagued Wari sites and the small sample size of our collection, we acknowledge the strong possibility that the current distribution pattern might also be the result of chance discoveries.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND SPECULATIONS

Symbols, such as those seen on the Wari circular pectorals and Y-shaped ornaments, only gain meaning when they successfully create links, in a wide range of cultural contexts, between the objects and specific cultural ideas (Sleeboom 2003:299). While the circular pectorals do not incorporate the religious elements intrinsic to the horizon-defining iconography of the Wari and Tiwanaku, they most likely reflect some other cultural connection. However, as they are made from precious metals (DeMarrais *et al.* 1996), by skilled craftsmen (Owen 2010), and were prominently displayed, these artifacts seem to have functioned as markers of elevated social status or authority.

If the circular pectorals did not hold significance rooted in the broader pan-Andean religious iconography of the Wari and Tiwanaku, what linkages did they hold? Regrettably, numerous plausible explanations exist, but little evidence exists to support any single interpretation. For instance, it is plausible that the circular pectorals could signify a form of ranking associated with warfare and warriors. One case in point is Pectoral EP 2012-22 that was recovered at the site of Espíritu Pampa along with a bronze axe head and a bronze spear-thrower hook. However, there is currently little additional data to support a linkage between combat and the circular pectorals. The three known images of individuals wearing circular pectorals do not depict them wielding weapons. The two gold and shell artifacts show individuals running and standing, yet neither brandish weapons (see Figure 18). Similarly, the Museo Larco stone figurine which showcases a circular pectoral, is

unarmed (see figure 20). Moreover, the two largest caches of Wari warrior figurines, both found at the site of Pikillacta, include soldiers and captives, but none are shown wearing circular pectorals (Arriola Tuni and Tesar 2011; Cuba Muniz and Amachi Flores 2019).

An alternative explanation could be that the circular pectorals represent some kind of trade or gift item held by intermediate elites or other individuals aiming to demonstrate their affiliation with the more powerful Wari. Given that five of the pectorals come from Espiritu Pampa, a site which is recognized as a Wari settlement in *direct contact* with Ayacucho, the notion of a trade or gift rationale gains merit. However, the presence of the same core motif on Y-shaped ornaments, hints that even more profound connections might have bound the wearers of these disks to the overarching powers of the state.

The hypothesis that we endorse posits that the significance of the Wari pectorals and their wearers is not derived from their connections to the widely shared religious elements of Wari and Tiwanaku, nor as direct reflections of military prowess, or even as prevalent trade items linked to Wari society. Instead, we propose that pectorals embody more nuanced social or political concepts that gained their relevance through their association with the earthly grounded, coercive power that the Wari state held over its subjects. More specifically, these pectorals might have even been part of elaborate ritual costumes that were adorned by state actors during special events to connect the wearers with mythical beings within an Ayacucho-based cosmovision. The slightly unhuman nature of the Museo Larco stone figurine could be cited to support this hypothesis. Such linkages between myths, state-actors, and symbols (Bauer 1991, 1996) should still be considered a form of coercive power, since it is the state's proven ability to enforce its authority, as represented by such

symbols, which allows sovereignty to exist (Sleeboom 2003).

Within this possible explanation, the large Y-shaped ornament and other burial goods interred with the “Lord of Vilcabamba” mark the highest level of Wari regional authority yet found in the highlands, someone we have glossed as a regional governor. The discovery of various circular pectorals at the site of Espiritu Pampa and other Wari sites across the highlands, all featuring the same orbiting circles motif, aids in identifying another elite position, but one that was, based on the material remains, lower than that of a regional governor.⁹

Within this context, the Y-shaped ornaments and circular pectorals marked individuals who held formal positions, bestowed or sanctified by even higher Wari authorities (presumably in the capital city of Huari), and acknowledged by the general populace. It is specifically the orbiting circles design that appears on the silver Y-shaped ornaments and as a boss on the silver circular pectorals that link these two different markers of elite positions within a single unifying, yet hierarchical, cultural concept.

Within this context, we can also question whether the same basic insignias were used simultaneously to mark multiple Wari officials, or represent a generational succession of office holders. For example, it seems reasonable under this model to propose that the larger Y-shaped ornaments mark the highest-level official at the site, a level that was achievable by only one person at a time, while the circular pectorals could have indicated lower-level office holders,

⁹ This is not to say, however, that the Wari necessarily ruled over a series of distinct and connected territorial provinces, as there were also Wari colonies and enclaves at a distance from the heartland which would have had high level officials overseeing them (Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020; Jennings *et al.* 2021; Nash 2022).

a role that may have been fulfilled by multiple individuals concurrently. Unfortunately, there is, at present, not enough information to definitively resolve this issue.

Venturing further into speculation, we can inquire whether the positions of those who wore these pectorals were achieved or ascribed, the former being the results of personal actions and the later flowing from inherited characteristics or circumstances. Unfortunately, the Espíritu Pampa examples offer little insight into the cultural conditions through which individuals gained access to authority, and the other examples come from looted contexts. Nevertheless, the Cerro Ilucán pectoral, the smallest of our current sample, was recovered along with a large collection of other silver and gold artifacts (Bauer 2024). Several of the other objects within the Cerro Ilucán collection, particularly four pairs of differently sized small sandals and a host of miniature weapons, may allude to a juvenile context.¹⁰ If the pectoral was found within a child's grave, it may reflect an inherited social status among the Wari.¹¹

We have proposed that these objects reflect at least two levels of status or authority. One epitomized by the Y-shaped ornament wearers, and a lower level marked by the circular pectorals. Even more intriguing is the presence of two similar, but clearly discernable, sub-styles within the circular pectoral (the “petal” and the “meandering-line” designs) demarking two discernable divisions among the disk wearers.

These individuals may have been ranked vis-à-vis one another in a hierarchical system, or they may have held more symmetrical relationships, as are known to have existed among the Incas and many other groups in South America (e.g., *hanan* and *hurin*). What exact meanings did the orbiting circles designs carry for those who used or saw them? At present, a definitive answer eludes us. Nevertheless, we believe that substantial evidence suggests that there were widely held and broadly recognized symbols of status or authority among the Wari, and as such, these symbols may have connected these individuals with the coercive powers that emanated from the capital of the Wari in Ayacucho.

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¹⁰ It is important to note that Hamilton (2018:5) warns against assuming that miniature objects necessarily indicate the presence of children.

¹¹ It should also be considered that among the Incas, positions could be both achieved and ascribed, with the Inca appointing a person to a high office and then that position being passed on to their descendants.

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Site	Artifact #	Context	Size	Style	Reference
Colán (Amazonas)	nd	nd	nd	petal	<i>Ahora (Amazonas and Cajamarca)</i> 13 December 2012
Cutervo (Cajamarca)	nd	nd	16 cm	meandering- line	Bauer, current volume
Espiritu Pampa (Cusco)	EP 2012-19	1.12 ¹	unknown	unknown	Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:35-36
Espiritu Pampa (Cusco)	EP2012-7	2.10	unknown	unknown	Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:67, 69 (possible)
Espiritu Pampa (Cusco)	EP 2010-82	6.10	26 cm	petal	Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:118- 119, 180
Espiritu Pampa (Cusco)	EP 2010-84	6.9	29 cm	petal	Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:117- 118, 180
Espiritu Pampa (Cusco)	EP 2010-65	6.5	unknown	meandering- line	Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:104-107, 180
Espiritu Pampa (Cusco)	EP 2012-22 a	9.2 ²	21 cm	unknown	Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:124-125, 180-181
Espiritu Pampa (Cusco)	EP 2012-1	1.9 ³	23 cm	unknown	Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:32-33, 181
Kullupata (Cusco)	nd	nd	nd	meandering- line	Chávez 1985, 1987
Museo Nacional de Arqueología (Perú)	1096	nd	31 cm	meandering- line	Fonseca Santa Cruz and Bauer 2020:182
Santa Rosa (Ayacucho)	nd	nd	nd	meandering- line	Lidio Valdez, personal communication, 2020
¹ Cal AD 699±22 (Sample AA106771; cal AD 677–863; 95.4 percent confidence level).					
² Cal AD 686±28 (Sample AA 106770; cal AD 666–861; 95.4 percent confidence level).					
³ Cal AD 711±25 (Sample AA106769; cal AD 686–875; 95.4 percent confidence level).					

Table 1. Wari Circular Pectorals; nd = not determined. For contexts see Bauer et al.2005.



Figure 1. A Wari depiction of the staff god (center) flanked by profile deities on pottery from the site of Conchopata. Photograph by Bill Isbell courtesy of the Proyecto Arqueológico Conchopata.



*Figure 2: The principal burial at the Wari site of Espiritu Pampa.
Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.*



Figure 3: Both ends of the Y-shaped ornament from the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa terminate in round-nosed feline heads in profile that fall within Wari and Tiwanaku religious iconography. Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.



Figure 4: Two wide gold wristbands from the principal burial of the Wari site of Espiritu Pampa. Each band contains four embossed, round-nosed, anthropomorphic feline heads in profile that fall within the broad outlines of Wari and Tiwanaku religious iconography. The broad wristbands also have rows of nine embossed circles above and below the figures. Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.



Figure 5: The Y-shaped ornament found at the Wari site of Espiritu Pampa, artifact number EP 2010-67. Note the sets of three embossed, circular designs on each side of this pectoral, each composed of a central circle surrounded by eight orbiting circles.

Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz, courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.



Figure 6: A large silver Y-shaped ornament at the Linden Museum, measuring 55 by 44 centimeters, accession number M31039, is similar to the Y-shaped ornament found at the Wari site of Espíritu Pampa. Photograph by A. Dreyer courtesy of the Linden Museum.



Figure 7: Two small silver Y-shaped ornaments measuring 17 by 17 centimeters and 17 by 16 centimeters held by the Linden Museum, accession number M31039.

Photograph by A. Dreyer courtesy of the Linden Museum.



Figure 8: Pectoral EP 2010-82, a necklace composed of nineteen silver thimble-shaped beads was found beside Pectoral EP 2010-82. [photo credit?]



Figure 9: A silver circular pectoral with a six-petal design from Espiritu Pampa, artifact EP 2010-82.
Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz, courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.



Figure 10: A silver circular pectoral with a six-petal design from Espíritu Pampa, artifact EP 2010– 84.). The boss contains seven circles orbiting around a central circle. Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz, courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.

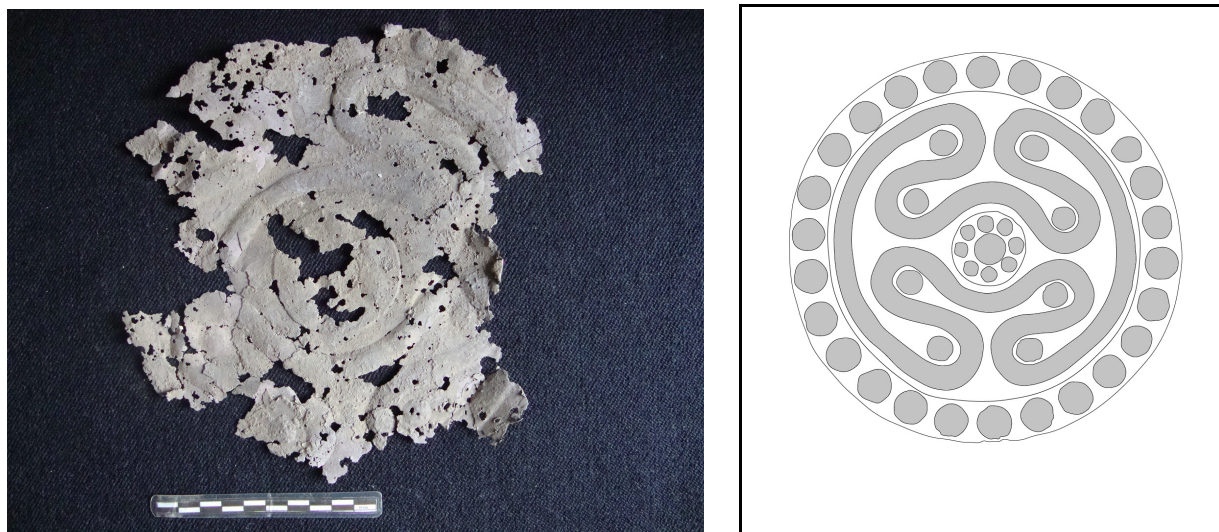


Figure 11: Left: a poorly preserved silver circular pectoral with a meandering line design from Espíritu Pampa, artifact EP 2010-65.

Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.

Right: a stylized version of a meandering-line pectoral.

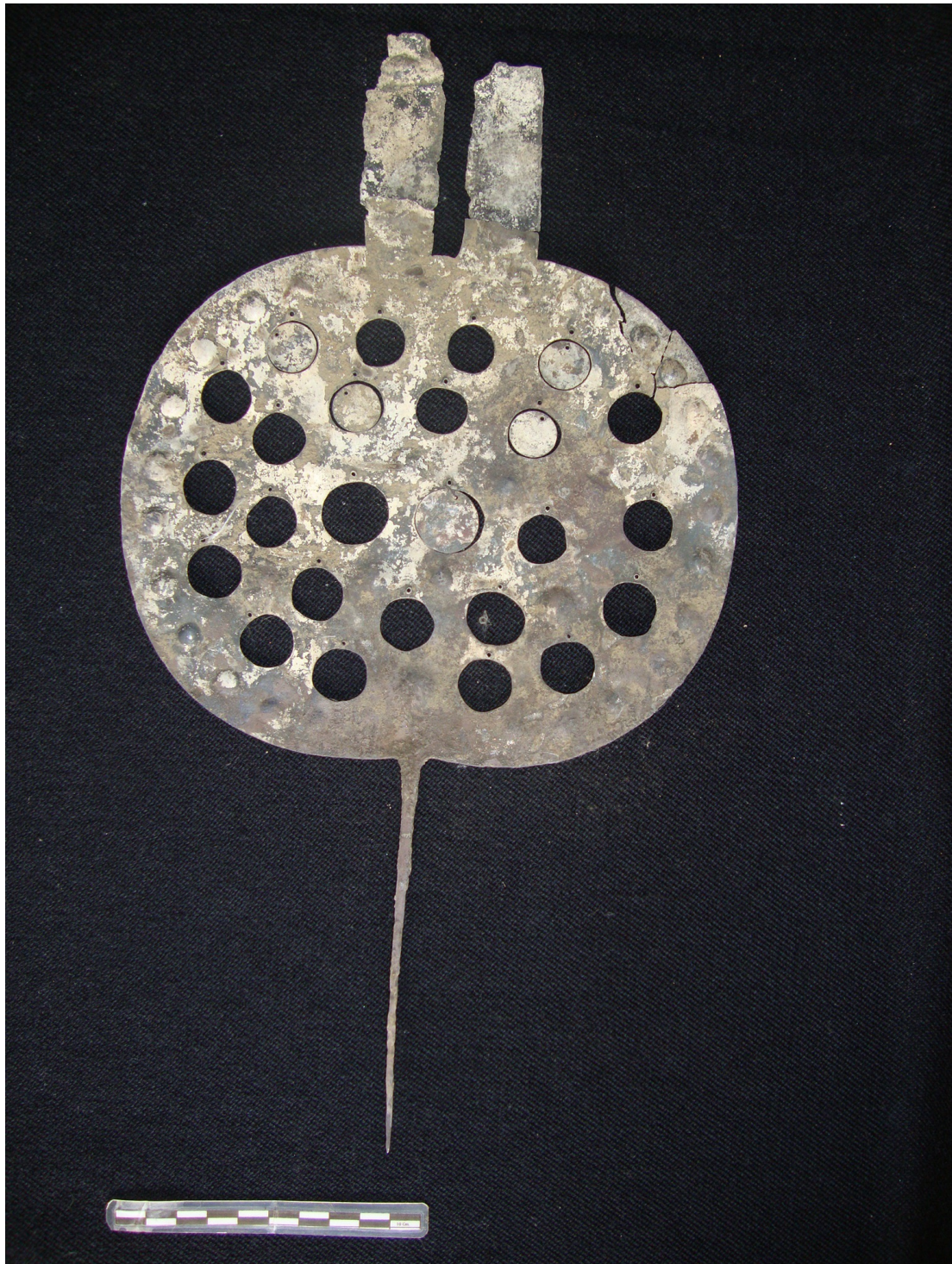


Figure 12: A silver, circular, two-plumed diadem pin, artifact number EP 2010-60, decorated with small, embossed circles along its exterior and cutout silver sequins in its interior was found within the same context as pectoral EP 2010-65.

Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz, courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.



Figure 13: Pectoral EP 2012-01 is poorly preserved. However, a double row of border circles and two rows of orbiting circles around the boss can be identified.

Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.



Figure 14: Pectoral EP 2012-22 is poorly preserved. However, evidence of a double row of circles can be seen along its edges.

Photograph by Javier Fonseca Santa Cruz courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Peru.



Figure 15: A silver circular pectoral with a five-pedal design found in 2012 in the Santuario Nacional Cordillera de Colán. Photograph by Alberto Pintadi V.
Courtesy of Diario La Ahora: Amazonas y Cajamarca.

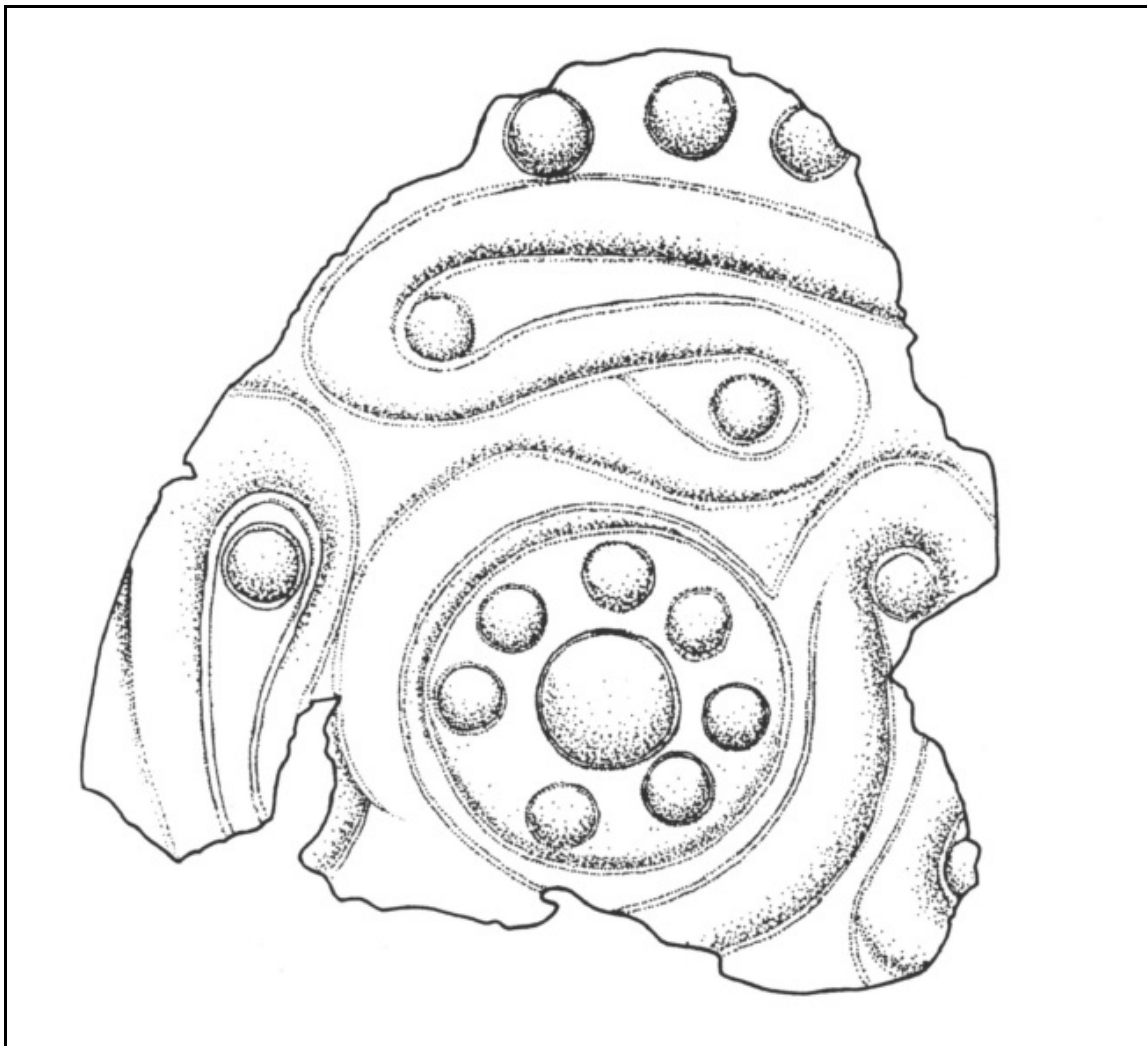


Figure 16: The remains of a circular pectoral with a meandering-line design from the site of K'ullupata (left). After Chávez 1985:42, Figure 31.



Figure 17: An ornate meandering line design pectoral, Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia del Perú, accession number 1096. Photograph courtesy of Miłosz Giersz.



Figure 18: A silver circular pectoral, with a meandering line design, looted from Cerro Ilucán in 2017 is similar to other circular pectorals found at Espíritu Pampa and elsewhere in the Wari realm.
Photograph by Brian S. Bauer courtesy of the Town Council of Cutervo.



Figure 19: (Left) fragments of a silver circular pectoral found near the town of Santa Rosa (Ayacucho) in 2020. Photographer unknown.

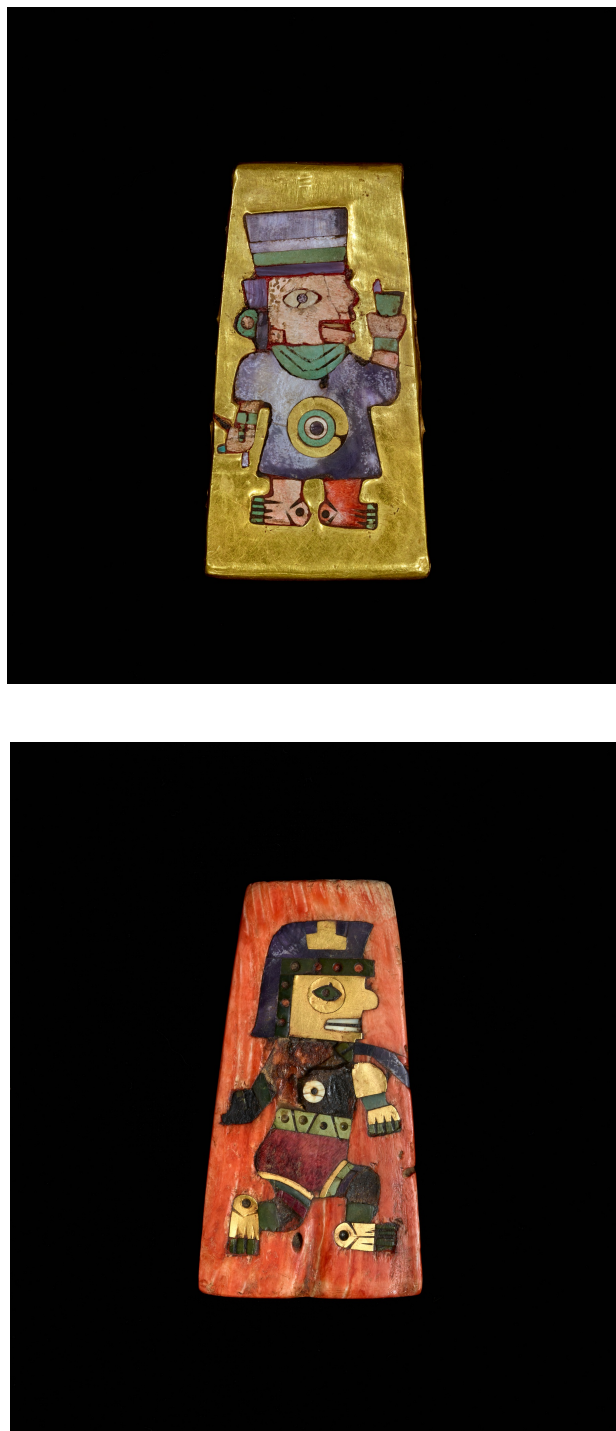


Figure 20: Two shell and gold ornaments showing individuals wearing circular pectorals. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Alfred C. Glassell Jr., accession number 2010.1032 (bottom) measures 6.6 by 3.5 by 0.8 centimeters, and accession number 2010.1030 (top) measures 6.6 by 3.6 by 0.7 centimeters.



Figure 21: A stone figurine in the Larco Museum, accession number ML301403, height 6.7 centimeters, wears a circular pectoral with a meandering line design. Very similar pectorals have been recovered from several Wari sites, including Espíritu Pampa, Santa Rosa, Ilucán, and K'ullupata.
Photograph by Brian S. Bauer.

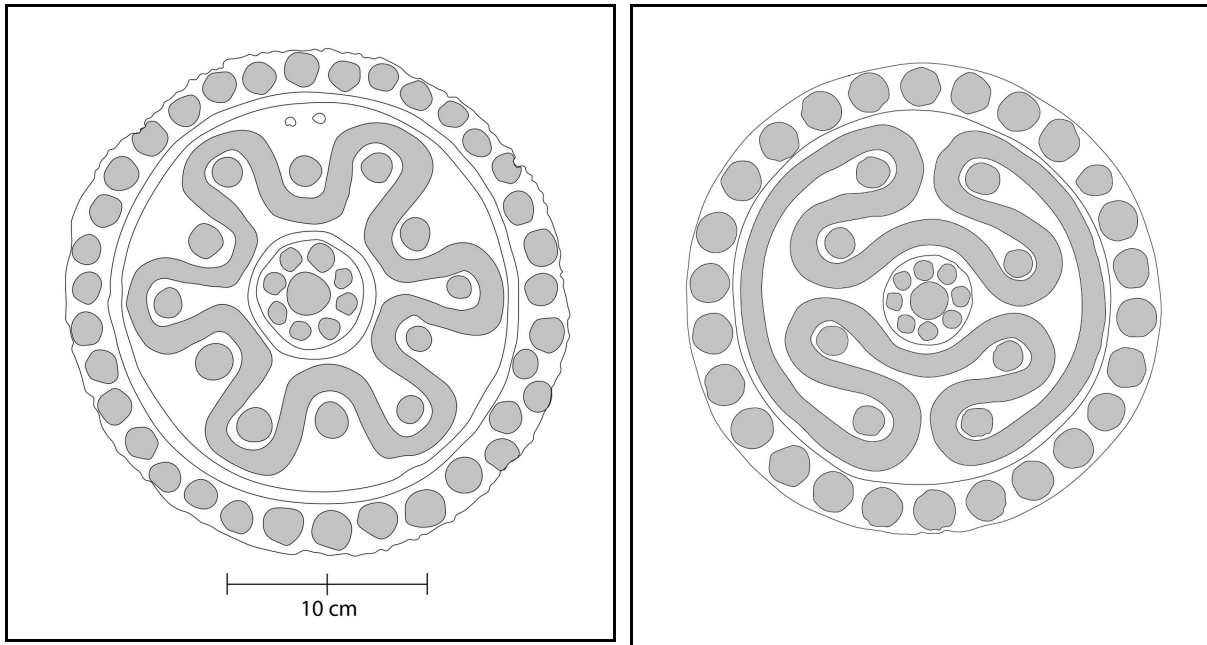


Figure 22: A stylized version of a meandering line design (right) and a petal design (left). While they are both distinct, the two sub-styles share similar features, including border circles, a boss composed of orbiting circles, and a thick embossed line that weaves in between circles.

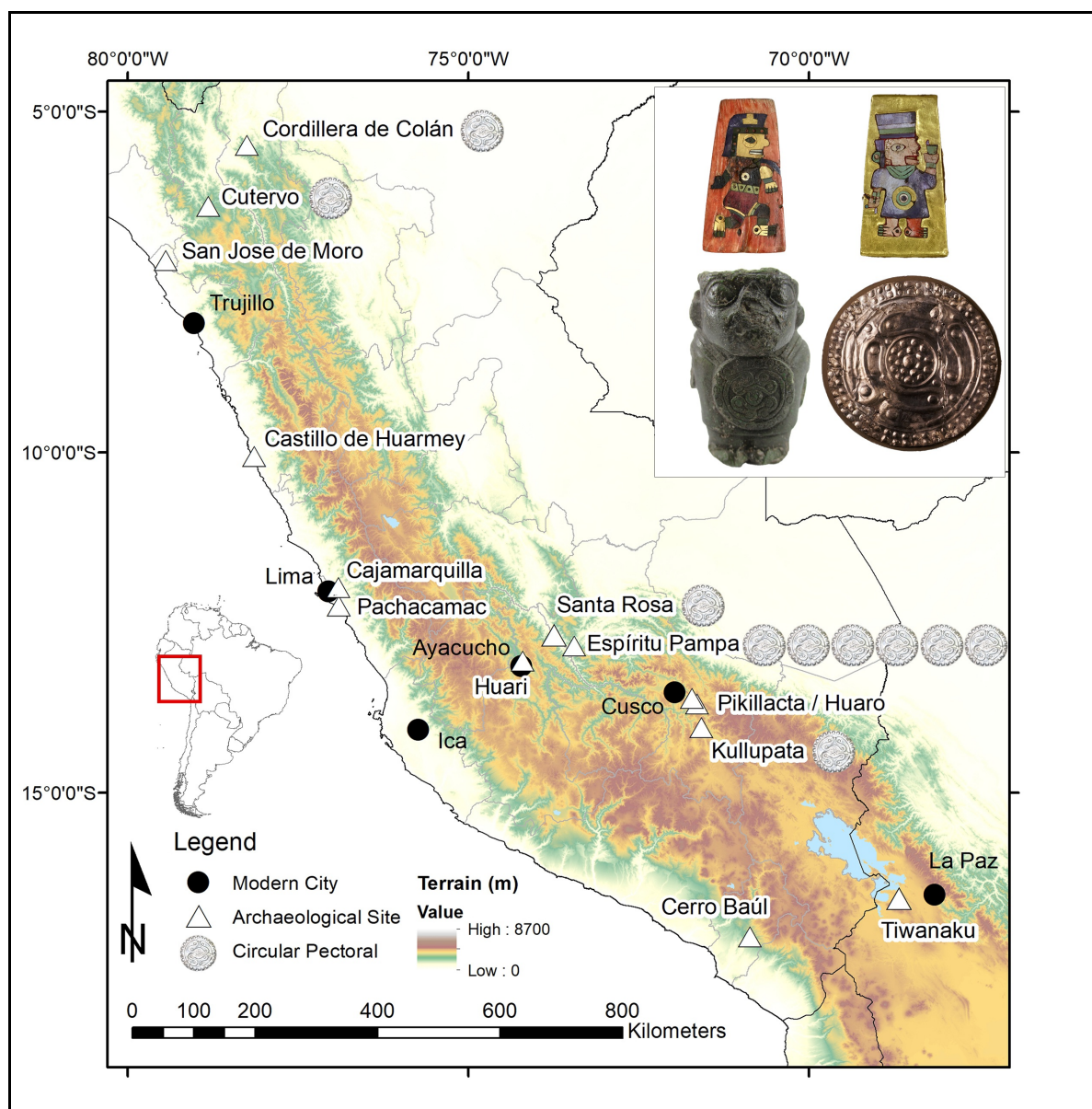


Figure 23: Distribution of Wari silver circular pectorals. Ten have been found at known locations (shown on map) while another four (upper right) are unprovenienced objects in museum collections.

