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Keepers of memories. Pre-Columbian Peruvian workbaskets in the Anthropology and Ethnology Museum of Florence

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Abstract. Pre-Columbian workbaskets were common inside burials, especially in coastal Andean regions. They mostly contained tools and raw materials related to textile production, but there were also some elements (e.g. *Spondylus* shells) not strictly connected to a practical use. Workbaskets are mentioned in many contributions by scholars and researchers but unfortunately rarely studied in detail. The Pre-Columbian collections housed in the Anthropology and Ethnology Museum in Florence include four Peruvian workbaskets. As no in-depth study has ever been published on them, this contribution aims to provide a detailed analysis of their structure and contents.

Keywords: *Spondylus* shell, funerary context, rituals, symbolic value, textile production.

INTRODUCTION

European and extra-European museums hold many ancient Pre-Columbian artifacts from Peru. They were related to Andean civilizations which reached their peak before the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century AD.

Most of these collections were acquired between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, mainly by travelers, collectors, and traders. Pre-Columbian artifacts have a high archeological and historical value and most of them were retrieved from archeological sites. Unfortunately, precise documentation of objects was often lacking because archaeological excavations methods at that time were often haphazard, not yet rigorously standardized to follow rigorous regulations and access methods.

As a results, there is often no information about the context in which the finds were found and it is not always possible to trace the origin and method of retrieval of the collections. Unfortunately, many burials were decontextualized and the funerary objects were dismembered and moved out of context.

Pre-Columbian workbaskets were common inside burials, especially in coastal Andean regions. They are a very important presence in documenting some tools and their association with the deceased. In most cases, they retain the original content within them, and, in this way, it is possible to reconstruct «the memory» of an ancient civilization, considering a combination of elements of daily life, symbols, and rituals.

PRE-COLUMBIAN PERUVIAN WORKBASKETS

Although Pre-Columbian Peruvian workbaskets were mentioned in many contributions by scholars and researchers they were rarely studied in detail. Workbaskets were first mentioned by Reiss and Stubel (1880) in the reports about the Ancon archaeological excavations of 1874-1875 and later by Holmes (1888) and Mason (1904). More recently there were specific studies dedicated to the workbaskets by Dransart (1992; 1993; 2014) and the study of Price *et al.* (2015).

Workbaskets were mainly attested on the Peruvian central coast in the Late Intermediate Period within burial contexts (Price *et al.*, 2015). However, their presence was probably earlier (Dransart, 1993), as evidence was also found on the northern and southern coasts and in the highlands (Price *et al.*, 2015).

More precisely defined, the workbasket was a container specifically structured to store a set of different materials inside. Most examples from Peru were made up of a woven structure that incorporates flat slats supporting them and determining their rigid shape. They were equipped with a lid hinged to the base structure. As stated by Dransart (1993), their type and manufacturing seem rather standardized, they were consistent in size, manufacture, and in general, content (Price *et al.*, 2015).

Workbaskets were often found in female burials, and generally contained tools and raw materials related to textile production (e.g. raw fiber, balls and skeins of cotton, and camelid fiber yarn (dyed and undyed), combs, spindles, spindle whorls, tapestry needles, sewing needles, carved sticks, textiles, and bobbins or shuttles for weaving). Accordingly, it is reasonable to hypothesize that they had a utilitarian function and probably preserved the tools used by the deceased in life. In addition, spoons, shells, and small gourds, wooden or ceramic containers were frequently found inside the baskets as well. These objects suggest an underlying cultural and symbolic value, as some elements

(e.g. *Spondylus* shells) were not strictly connected to practical use. Probably, such materials, of social and ritual significance, were added at the time of the burial (Price *et al.*, 2015).

THE FLORENTINE COLLECTION

The Pre-Columbian collection housed in the Anthropology and Ethnology Museum in Florence conserves four Peruvian workbaskets. Only two of these (n. 3678 and 3730) were physically preserved together with their contents; the other two (n. 3742 and 3847), have only partially conserved the original contents.

The workbaskets were part of the collection made in the 19th century by the ophthalmologist Ernesto Mazzei. He donated most of the objects between 1875 and 1884 to Paolo Mantegazza, at the time director of the museum (Dionisio and Bigoni, 2021).

Workbaskets are attributed to Chancay culture. The practice of including workbaskets within funerary contexts developed starting from the Late Intermediate Period onward, and is most notable within the communities of the central Peru coast (Price *et al.*, 2015). It is difficult to collect certain data related to the workbaskets because of the scanty remaining documentation. Further workbaskets may be incomplete or undergone more or less significant manipulations over time, which may have altered the workbasket's original content (Price *et al.*, 2015). Due to these considerations, there is a need to focus and make a detailed analysis of existing attestations.

Catalog n. 3730

Workbasket n. 3730 is in a fair state of preservation. It is composed of a rectangular structure made up of diagonally woven plant materials arranged around wooden stiffeners (Fig. 1).

In the museum ethnographic catalog, it is described as «*valigetta di foglie intessute a disegno contenente fusi, fionde ecc. Antico Perù*». On August 13, 1926, a note was included in the catalog, containing the description of the workbasket content: «*questa valigetta contiene: 4 pezzi di stoffa, una lunga cintura, del cotone, un oggetto che fu creduto una fionda, un sacchettino tipo «abitino», 6 valve di conchiglia, 8 fusi più o meno guasti, una borsetta di cuoio entro alla quale erano una catenella di perle di vetro e anelli metallici, un pendaglio di metallo, due gomitoli di filo colorato, 8 fusi in buono stato, 2 spole (?) da tessere di legno intagliato. Le cose sottolineate si estraggono dalla valigetta per esporle separatamente*».

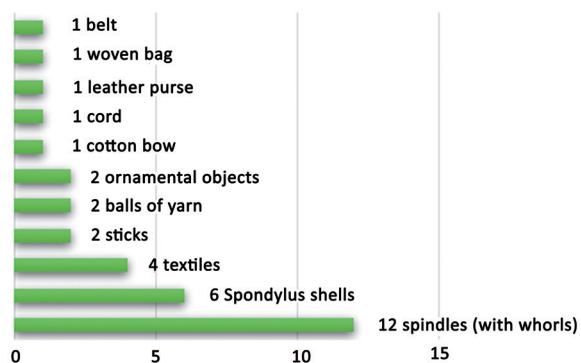


Fig. 1. The external structure of the workbasket n. 3730 (Credit: G. Dionisio).

The internal content originally included 37 objects, mainly tools and raw materials related to textile production, such as spindles and spindle whorls, sticks with carved decorations at one end, and cotton, yarns, and textile samples on the other. Furthermore, elements of different functions and types were added to these artifacts, such as *Spondylus* shells and ornamental objects.

As of today, 33 artifacts are preserved (Tab. 1). Most of them are displayed in the museum (Room 2). However, a small part of the content is stored in warehouse of the museum.

n. 3730



Tab. 1. The remaining content of the workbasket n. 3730.

Catalog n. 3678

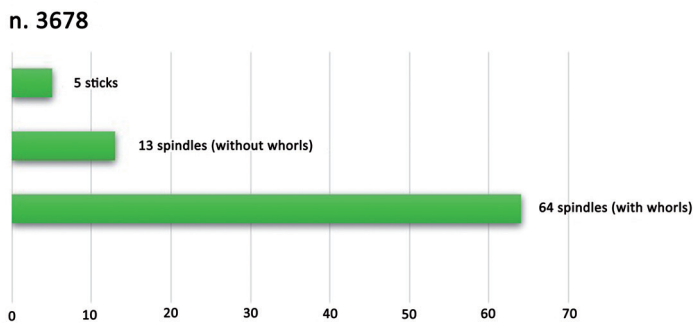
Workbasket n. 3678 is in a good state of preservation. The type of manufacturing is similar to the previous workbasket (Fig. 2).

According to the museum ethnographic catalog, this workbasket is described as «*valigetta rettangolare, con coperchio, di foglie intrecciate a disegno, contenente cotone e un gran numero di fusi. Antico Perù*».



Fig. 2. The external structure of the workbasket n. 3678 (Credit: S. Bambi).

On August 13, 1926, the following was noted in the catalog: «*di questi fusi che sono in numero di 120, se ne estraggono dalla valigetta 90 per esporli separatamente. Per opportunità di esposizione si cambia in gran parte (cioè, tranne quattro fusi), il contenuto di questa valigetta con quello della n. 3742*». As stated in the description, the workbasket is characterized by many spindles inside it (Tab. 2).



Tab. 2. The remaining content of the workbasket n. 3678.

Five wooden sticks are also present: three of them have some cotton threads wrapped in the central part (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Wooden sticks with cotton threads (workbasket n. 3678). (Credit: G. Dionisio).

As reported by Price *et al.* (2015), if the content reflects the original toolkit, it is possible to hypothesize that the spindles may have been added before the burial, to guarantee a consistent supply to the deceased for eternity on one hand. On the other hand, it could be possible that the spindles would be considered offerings donated by the living to guarantee the goodwill of the deceased. Moreover, it could be possible that many spindles were indicative of the role played by the deceased in life, who, perhaps, supervised weaving works and oversaw the distribution of the related tools.

Currently, there are 77 preserved spindles, almost all equipped with terracotta spindle whorls (Fig. 4). Most of the spindles still retain traces of red, white, yellow, and black painted in stripes on the surface; some have wrapped thread and cotton in the middle portion of the surface (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Spindles with whorls related to the workbasket n. 3678 (Credit: G. Dionisio).



Fig. 5. Spindles without whorls related to the workbasket n. 3678 (Credit: G. Dionisio).

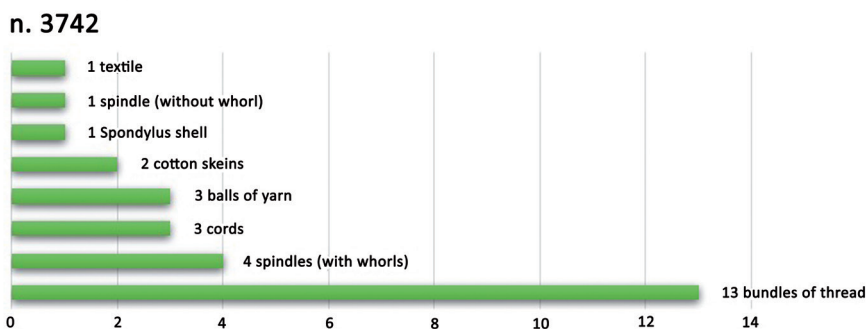
Spindle whorls are particularly interesting due to the variety of colors used and the decorative motifs. Whorls were divided into three groups based on their background color: most of the spindle whorls (36) have a dark background, 13 have a light background while 8 are monochromatic, painted in the colors of white, purple, brick red, light blue, yellow-green, and black. Unfortunately, 7 spindle whorls are very poorly preserved and cannot be attributed to any specific group. As regards the decorative motifs, most of the evidence is characterized by geometric (linear motifs, grids, circles, stepped elements, triangles), cruciform, and wave decorations. Zoomorphic decorations depicting monkeys, birds, fish, felines, and llamas are also frequent.

Catalog n. 3742

This workbasket was originally reported in the museum catalog with the words «*valigetta di foglie intrecciate a disegno contenente fusi, gomitoli e cotone di tre colori. Antico Perù*».

It was not preserved as it deteriorated over time and was removed from the collection in 1926. On 13 August 1926, the following was noted: «*da questa valigetta che contiene falde di cotone [...], fili colorati in matassine e gomitoli, una valva di conchiglia, 2 fionde (??), si tolgono per esporli a parte 5 fusi in buono stato. Per opportunità di esposizione il contenuto di questa valigetta (la quale è in cattivo stato di conservazione e si mette in magazzino), si passa nella valigetta 3678, nella quale si lasciano però anche 4 dei suoi fusi. In questa valigetta n. 3742 si mette il contenuto residuale della 3678*».

The content of the workbasket includes, approximately, thirty objects (Tab. 3).



Tab. 3. *The remaining content of the workbasket n. 3742.*

Many of these are tools related to the field of textile production, such as spindles and spindle whorls, balls of colored threads, skeins, twisted and

wound cords, and flaps of raw mid-brown and light brown cotton fibers. In addition to this, the content currently also contains a fragment of a textile (a probable fabric sling) and a *Spondylus* shell (Fig. 6).



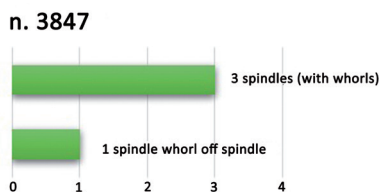
Fig. 6. Textile tools and other objects related to the workbasket n. 3742 (Credit: S. Bambi).

The spindles are all accompanied by a terracotta spindle whorl, except one, which has cotton threads wrapped in the middle part (n. 3742/3). The spindle whorls are discoid and composite in shape. The decorative motifs engraved on them reproduce geometric and cruciform motifs, except for the whorl inserted on spindle n. 3742/4, on which a zoomorphic decoration, reproducing birds, is engraved.

Catalog n. 3847

This workbasket was also not preserved. It was originally reported in the museum catalog with the following wording «*valigetta di foglie intrecciate a disegno contenente fusi eleganti, una fusaiolina, un orecchino e molto cotone. Antico Perù*». Of the original content reported in the catalog, three wooden spindles are currently preserved, characterized, in the central part, by a small

terracotta spindle whorl of a composite shape, engraved and painted. A single terracotta monochromatic spindle whorl, that is abraded and ruined, is also present (Tab. 4).



Tab. 4. The remaining content of the workbasket n. 3847.

Two of the spindle whorls are characterized by zoomorphic decorative motifs (probably felines) while the engraving of the spindle whorl n. 3847/2 reproduces an anthropomorphic motif, probably the face of *Pachamama*, the goddess of fertility, fecundity, and abundance. She embodies a maternal figure, who gives life and protects (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Spindles and spindle whorls related to the workbasket n. 3847 (Credit: G. Dionisio).

SPONDYLUS SHELLS

Some objects found inside the workbaskets do not have a purely utilitarian function and it seems that they may have been inserted for propitiatory or ritual purposes.

The use of *Spondylus* shells is attested in Peru as early as the Preceramic period. It is found in sites characterized by monumental and ritual value, such as Caral (Solis *et al.*, 2001) and the ceremonial center of Chavin de Huantar. The findings are not only physical but there are also iconographic representations.

Numerous attestations have also been found in the Moche and Nasca cultures, passing through the Huari empire, Lambayeque (Pillsbury, 1996), and Chimù culture in the Late Intermediate Period (Keatinge and Day, 1973) until declining during the Inca period (Carter, 2011).

The most common species of this type of bivalve concern the *Spondylus Princeps* and the *Spondylus Calcifer*. *Calcifer* commonly display a purple to orange colored inner rim, while *Princeps* tend to display an orange to red color throughout the outer shell and inner rim. Long projections are characteristic of the outer shell of *Princeps*, earning it the name «spiny oyster» (Bauer, 2007). As already stated by Hinks (2016), *Spondylus Princeps* is, generally, the bivalve species most frequently found within funerary contexts. This is a trend also followed by the testimonies from the Florentine Museum.

Both species are native to the Ecuadorian coast. Although, some scholars assert that these bivalves could also be found as far as the northern coast of Peru (Carter, 2011). Despite this, it is without doubt that these artifacts are not commonly found and that exchanges and travels were necessary to obtain them.

It is also likely that specialist knowledge was required to recognize and remove them once camouflaged underwater. These first aspects are already significant for the importance of this type of shell (Hinks, 2016). In addition, the inclusion of *Spondylus* is quite frequently found in ritual depositions, in elite burial contexts, and as offering objects (Hinks, 2016; Alva and Donnan, 1993; Benson and Cook, 2013; Blower, 1995; Carter, 2011).

Many artifacts of relevant ornamental and artistic value, found in archaeological contexts, present *Spondylus* inclusions. In the same way, this bivalve shell was also reproduced on ceramic containers, as attested, for example, in the Florentine Museum collection (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. *Spondylus* shell reproductions. Chimù-Inka period. Mazzei Collection (Credit: S. Bambi).

Therefore, all these findings confirm the relevance of these objects, characterized by a symbolic and religious value. They were elements of noteworthy prestige, probably associated with the female figure and, therefore, symbols of fertility and linked to water (Blower, 1996). Their procurement was a prerogative reserved for the elite classes (Hinks, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

The pre-Columbian workbaskets hosted in Florence's Anthropology and Ethnology Museum preserve artifacts mainly related to textile production. A relatively conspicuous spindles' variety is present in all four contexts and most of them are equipped with a terracotta spindle whorls in the surface central part. Unfortunately, the remaining content of the workbasket n. 3847 is very small and does not allow us to establish further and detailed analogies.

It was found that all the workbaskets show the presence of tools and instruments related to textile production, except for the samples n. 3730 and 3742, presenting artifacts that do not have a utilitarian value but a symbolic and ritual value too, thus highlighting the importance and the high social status of the deceased to whom they belonged.

In summary, the contents of the Florentine workbaskets show close analogies with what has already been highlighted by recent international scientific studies. These precious keepers of memories are important witnesses, that «tell» us people's stories, beliefs, and material activities. They are treasure chests that allow us to reconstruct native cultures' important narratives.

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