

## **Threads of History: Revealing the Craft, Aesthetics, and Cultural Significance of Wari cane baskets of Castillo de Huarmey, Peru**

Castillo de Huarmey archaeological site is located on the Peruvian coast near Huarmey, about 300 kilometers north of today's capital Lima. The place was once a royal necropolis, a center of power and imperial administration, and a production center for the elite crafts of the Wari culture – the first Andean empire dating to a long time before the Inca (600-1000 AD). In 2012 Polish archaeologists led by Dr. Miłosz Giersz made there the first-ever discovery of a tomb of Wari elites buried with exceptional grave goods indicating the women's high status in Wari society. Gold and silver wares, necklaces, pectorals, ear ornaments, meticulously made fabrics, looms, spindles, and objects made of wood and bone, as well as ceramic vessels, decorated cane baskets, and even musical instruments, and miniature lime containers provide information about the wealth of Wari rulers being a testimony to their behavior, traditions, beliefs, rituals, and ideology.

In 2022 another critical part of the necropolis was discovered – the so-called „Gallery of Elite Artisans.” It was a tomb of individuals who were likely artisans at the royal court. Particularly noteworthy was the one of a man buried with dozens of items that may have served him during his lifetime. These included tools (knives, axe, saw), raw materials (reeds, lumps of resin, and blocks of minerals), and exemplars at various stages of production, which were elements of the basketmaker's workshop. Among these extraordinary objects, archaeologists have also found metal ornaments, which in Wari society were considered markers of high status and are associated with the wielding of power. Who was this artisan from Castillo de Huarmey, who at the same time was a representative of the imperial elite?

The unique discovery of the Gallery of Elite Artisans provides us with an invaluable opportunity to dive deep into the traditions of ancient craftsmanship. It can be a source of knowledge about the skills and techniques skilled artisans use in pre-Columbian America. The goal of the project is to reconstruct the basketry workshop of the Wari culture and to find answers to the question of the status and role of elite artisans in stratified ancient societies. To determine from what raw materials, with what tools, and how baskets were made in the past, I will conduct chemical and technical analyses. These will provide information on plants and minerals, as well as dye formulas used in the process of, from the one hand, weaving structure of baskets and, on the other, dyeing the fabrics and threads that constitute the colorful decoration. In addition, I will perform experiments that will result in basket weaving using traditional methods. Investigating the objects deposited in the graves of the elite artisans – their location, context, and decoration – will be detective work that will solve the mystery of the artist's identity. Perhaps it will also reveal something more about the recipients of the baskets – the aristocracy of the Empire, who were probably patrons exercising patronage over the arts and, to some extent, controlled artisan production by imposing on the court artisans the form and decoration of their goods.

Taking up this topic is important not only because of the lack of previous research devoted to pre-Columbian basketry but also because of the great importance of the Castillo de Huarmey to the archaeology of pre-Columbian Peru as a whole. The results of the analyses may open the way to new interpretations and change perceptions of the cultural and social processes taking place in Wari society at the time. This will be the first-ever comprehensive study of Peruvian basketry done using the most advanced mixed analytical methods. The documentation resulting from the project will undoubtedly be an excellent source of information for later researchers of the subject, as well as for ethnologists and archaeologists investigating the phenomenon of craft specialization among prehistoric and modern societies in other parts of the globe. The latest finds from the Castillo de Huarmey can also inspire today's artisans in the region, who, based on the famous discovery, can revive ancient artistic techniques and incorporate them into their artisanal production. Thanks to the work of archaeologists, Huarmey hosts many celebrations and exhibitions that are of particular interest to the city's inhabitants. They are the ones who, proud of the ancient history of their region, take the initiative themselves and, through craft production, refer to ancient traditions. This interaction between antiquity and the present enables increased interest in their own heritage, cultural preservation, and the evolution of traditional crafts, making a recently dead culture thrive in our modern world.