

Royal massacre site discovered in ruins on ancient Maya city
Skeletons of men, women and children found with precious adornments

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Thirty-one assassinated and dismembered Maya nobles have been found in a sacred cistern at the entrance to the sprawling royal palace in the ruins of the ancient city of Cancuén, capital of one of the richest kingdoms of the Classic Maya civilization (circa A.D. 300-900), located in the Petén rain forest of Guatemala. The National Geographic Society, the Ministry of Culture of Guatemala and Vanderbilt University announced the gruesome discovery, which records what may have been a critical moment at the beginning of the mysterious collapse of this great ancient civilization.

The team of Guatemalan and American archaeologists, led by Arthur A. Demarest, Ingram Professor of Anthropology at Vanderbilt University, also discovered the skeletons of the king and queen in shallow burials about 80 yards from the mass grave. More than a dozen other skeletons of executed high-status individuals, some dismembered, also were found at a nearby site.

The discovery of unfinished defensive walls, scattered spearheads, abandoned palace and house constructions, and skeletons with markings of spear and ax wounds reveals that the Cancuén kingdom was attacked, the city was destroyed and its royalty were executed in about A.D. 800, Demarest said.

Around the palace and at one of the site's portages, a system of hastily constructed and unfinished stone and wooden palisade walls gives evidence of a desperate attempt to defend the city from attack. "Clearly these defenses failed," said Demarest.

"The king and queen and their nobles apparently were gathered together and slain *en masse* — many by lance thrusts to the neck or head," he said. "The bones show men, women and children of all ages to have been slain." Even two pregnant women were killed — the fetuses borne by each were still preserved in the wet mud that later filled the ancient stone reservoir. The robust bones, cranial deformation and fine adornments — including jades, jaguar fang necklaces and Pacific coast shells — indicate that all were nobles from the ancient palace, possibly even the extended royal family.

The Cancuén kingdom was one of the richest Maya city-states due to its strategic position at the start of the Pasión River, the greatest trade route of the ancient Maya world. According to Demarest, the site was a gateway between the Classic Maya civilization of the lowland jungles of Mexico and northern Guatemala and the volcanic highlands and coasts to the south. Its wealth can be seen in its sprawling royal palace, which covered an area of almost six football fields and was blanketed with hundreds of huge stucco sculptures. The palace was surrounded by workshops in jade, volcanic glass, pyrite ("fool's gold") and other precious goods from the mountains and coasts to the south.

"Yet after this tragic and violent event, unlike any yet discovered at a Classic Maya site, the city of Cancuén was completely abandoned, as were many other cities downstream on this same river route," said Demarest. "In the years preceding the royal massacre, warfare had spread across this western region of the ancient Maya world. It seems to have suddenly reached Cancuén at about A.D. 800."

The discovery was made when Guatemalan archaeologists Sylvia Alvarado and Cancuén project co-director Tomas Barrientos were excavating the sacred palace reservoir near the formal ceremonial entrance to the palace and realized that the 90-square-yard cistern was filled with thousands of human bones and precious artifacts. Because of the scale of the massacre discovery and the arrival of the rainy season, the archaeology team called upon the Forensic Anthropological Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG) for assistance.

FAFG was established during the signing of the Guatemalan Peace Accords in 1996, and its scientists have worked under United Nations supervision to excavate the mass graves of thousands of Guatemalan villagers killed in civil war genocide in Central America. Since then the forensic team, led by Guatemalan archaeologists Fredy Peccerelli and Jose Suasnavar, has been sent to Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Afghanistan and other countries to investigate other massacres for war crime trials.

The collaboration with the Vanderbilt archaeological team, led by Demarest and Barrientos, marks the first time that FAFG has excavated an ancient massacre site. Other teams of forensic scientists, including experts in DNA and isotope analysis, are now beginning to study the thousands of recovered bone fragments. They already have confirmed the interpretations on the execution and are now studying kinship, health and other aspects of the osteology (skeletal study) of the royal dead.

These massacre investigations and the Cancuén Archaeological Project are supported by the Ministry of Culture of Guatemala, the National Geographic Society, Vanderbilt University, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities and other international agencies.

As scientists continue to investigate the site of this "war crime" that occurred more than 1,200 years ago, they hope to reveal more clues on the final days of the ancient Maya civilization. "The next two years of study of the skeletons and artifacts will yield even more details about the lives and the violent deaths of the rulers and nobles of Cancuén," said Demarest.