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WORLD

Pyramid presents religious quandary for suburban Mexicans

Find forces town to protect both Indian, Christian holy sites

Wednesday, April 5, 2006; Posted: 5:45 p.m. EDT (21:45 GMT)

MEXICO CITY, Mexico (AP) -- Archeologists said Wednesday they have discovered a massive 6th-century Indian pyramid beneath the site of a centuries-old re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ.

Built on a hillside by the mysterious Teotihuacan culture, the pyramid was abandoned almost 1,000 years before Catholics began re-enacting the crucifixion there in the 1800s, unaware they were celebrating one of the holiest moments of their faith on a site originally dedicated to gods of earth, wind and rain.

While residents around the hillside in Iztapalapa, on the east side of Mexico City, express pride at the discovery, it illustrates the difficulty of preserving the many layers of Mexican history: archaeologists have decided not to fully excavate the site so as to avoid disturbing the Christian rites.

"When they first saw us digging there, the local people just couldn't believe there was a pyramid there," said archaeologist Jesus Sanchez. "It was only when the slopes and shapes of the pyramid, the floors with altars were found, that the finally believed us."

"The majority of the people now feel happy and proud, and have helped out a lot" in protecting the relics, Sanchez said.

The people of Iztapalapa -- now a low-income neighborhood plagued by squatter settlements -- began re-enacting the Passion of Christ in 1833, to give thanks for divine protection during a cholera epidemic.

During the ritual, which draws as many as a million spectators every year, a wooden cross is raised just a few yards from the buried remains of the Teotihuacan temple, and a man chosen to portray Christ is tied to the cross.

Archeologists said they will fill in the excavation pits that revealed the pyramid to prevent the structure from being damaged by Good Friday spectators.

"Both the pre-Hispanic structure and the Holy Week rituals are part of our cultural legacy, so we have to look for a way to protect both cultural values," said Sanchez, who, along with archaeologist Miriam Advincula, has been exploring the site since 2004.



Archaeologist Maria Flores works on the excavation of a pre-Hispanic structure in Mexico City on Wednesday.

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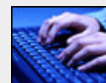
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Mexico abounds with cases in which Spanish conquerors literally built their Catholic

faith atop the remains of older religions.

Mexico's Catholic patroness, the Virgin of Guadalupe, appeared to the faithful only a few years after the 1521 Spanish conquest, on a hillside where Aztecs worshipped Tonantzin, their mother of the gods.

Mexico City's cathedral is built atop the remains of an Aztec temple, as are countless other churches in Mexico, partly as an attempt to forcibly supplant pre-Hispanic religions.

But the case of Iztapalapa hillside, known as the Hill of the Star, appears to be mere geographical coincidence, Sanchez said.

Pre-Hispanic cultures chose the hills that dot the otherwise flat, mountain-ringed Mexico Valley for their ceremonial sites, and postcolonial communities did the same, perhaps because the hilltops have commanding views or are safe from floods.

Measuring 150 yards on each of its four sides, the 18-yard tall pyramid was carved out on a natural hillside around 500 A.D.

It was abandoned around 800 A.D., when the Teotihuacan culture collapsed for unknown reasons. But the pyramid also had been partially rebuilt by the Coyotlatelcas, a little-known culture that went on to found the Toltec civilization.

The archaeological site is not safe from the sprawl of the modern megalopolis and its 19 million inhabitants. Archaeologists found that part of the temple had been destroyed by unauthorized home building on the hillside just 15 years ago.

"All of the hillsides in the Valley of Mexico have archaeological remains, and all of them urgently need to be protected," Sanchez said.

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Maria Flores, an archaeologist working on the excavation of a pre-Hispanic structure in Mexico City, Mexico, Wednesday, April 5, 2006. Archeologists said they have discovered a massive 6th-century Indian pyramid beneath the site of a centuries-old re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ. Built on a hillside by the mysterious Teotihuacan culture, the pyramid was abandoned almost 1,000 years before Catholics began re-enacting the Crucifixion there in the 1800s, unaware they were celebrating one of the holiest moments of their faith on a site originally dedicated to gods of earth, wind and rain. (AP Photo/Eduardo Verdugo)

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