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Sacrificial Burial Deepens Mystery at Teotihuacan, But Confirms City's Militarism

TEMPE, Ariz., Dec. 2 (AScribe Newswire) -- A spectacular new discovery from an ongoing excavation at the Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Moon is revealing a grisly sacrificial burial from a period when the ancient metropolis was at its peak, with artwork unlike any seen before in Mesoamerica.

Though archaeologists hope that discoveries at the pyramid will answer lingering questions about the distinctive culture that built the great city, the new find deepens the mystery, with clear cultural connections to other burials found at the site, but with some markedly new elements. With the excavation of the pyramid nearly complete, one important conclusion is emerging: combined with past burials at the site, the new find strongly suggests that the Pyramid of the Moon was significant to the Teotihuacano people as a site for celebrating state power through ceremony and sacrifice. Contrary to some past interpretation, militarism was apparently central to the city's culture.

Teotihuacan, the 2,000-year-old, master-planned metropolis that was the first great city of the Western Hemisphere, has long been perplexing to Mesoamerican archaeologists. Located 25 miles north of the current Mexico City, this ancient civilization left behind the ruins of a city grid covering eight square miles and signs of a unique culture. But even the Aztecs, who gave the city its present name, did not know who built it. They called the monumental ruins "the City of the Gods." The Pyramid of the Moon is one of the site's oldest structures, and has long been suspected to be its ceremonial center.

In the continuing excavation of the pyramid, led by Saburo Sugiyama, professor at Aichi Prefectural University in Japan and research professor at Arizona State University, and Ruben Cabrera of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History, the team has found a fifth tomb, this time at the center of the fifth of the pyramid's seven stages of construction. This phase of the excavation has been supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and the National Geographic Society. ASU manages an archaeological research center at the site.

The filled-in burial vault contains the remains of twelve people, all apparently sacrificed, together with a large variety of offerings and the remains of various animals of clearly symbolic importance. Ten of the human bodies were decapitated. Sugiyama, the excavation director, believes that the signs of violence and militarism in the burial are especially significant.

"What we have found in this excavation suggests that a certain kind of mortuary ritual took place inside the tomb before it was filled in. It is hard to believe that the ritual consisted of clean symbolic performances - it is most likely that the ceremony created a horrible scene of bloodshed with sacrificed people and animals," Sugiyama said. "Whether the victims and animals were killed at the site or a nearby place, this foundation ritual must have been one of the most terrifying acts recorded archaeologically in Mesoamerica."

All the human remains had their hands bound behind their backs, and the ten decapitated bodies appear to have been tossed, rather than arranged, on one side of the burial. The other two bodies Sugiyama describes as "richly ornamented" with greenstone earspools and beads, a necklace made of imitation human jaws, and other items indicating high rank.

The animal remains were found arranged on the sides of the burial structure, especially on the end

opposite the decapitated bodies, and include five canine skeletons (wolf or coyote), 3 feline skeletons (puma or jaguar), and 13 complete bird remains (many were tentatively identified eagle) - all animals that are believed to be symbols of warriors in Teotihuacano iconography, according to Sugiyama. Many of the animals appear to have been bound and there are also numerous animal skulls.

"We don't know who the victims were, but we know that this ritual was carried out during the enlargement process of a major monument in Teotihuacan, and highly symbolic objects associated with them suggest that the government wanted to symbolize expanding sacred political power and perhaps the importance of military institutions with the new monument," said Sugiyama.

Though Teotihuacan at its height was roughly contemporary with the early stages of the Mayan cities located to the south in the jungles of southern Mexico and Guatemala, archaeologists have long noted very distinct differences between the cultures and only minor evidence of interaction.

During an earlier stage of the excavation in 2002, Sugiyama and Cabrera found a burial (connected to the construction of the pyramid's sixth layer) that revealing a Mayan link with the city's aristocracy. The burial included three ceremonially positioned bodies adorned with jade artifacts of Mayan design.

The current discovery is connected to construction of the pyramid's earlier fifth layer, and has similarities to the second burial found by Sugiyama's team, which was also connected to that layer, which contained four bound men (two of whom isotopic evidence indicates were Teotihuacanos and two were foreigners), and some similar symbolic animal remains.

The current burial, however, also contains some startling new features - particularly an "offering" at the center of the burial containing an mosaic human figure, with some features unique in Mesoamerican art and enigmatic in its cultural connections. The central offering also contains various shell pendants, obsidian blades, projectile points, a fragmented slate object, and "many remains of organic materials."

"The mosaic figure was found on top of 18 large obsidian knives, carefully set in a radial pattern. Nine of these had a curving form, while the nine others had the form of the feathered serpent, a symbol of maximum political authority," noted Sugiyama. "Evidently this offering in some way formed the central symbolic meaning of the grave complex." Sugiyama said.

The burial also contained obsidian human figures, knives, projectile points; shell pendants and beads, ceramics (Tlaloc jars), plaques, and a large disk.

Currently completing the excavation, Sugiyama says that the recent digging is approaching the completion of the seven-year-long excavation of the Pyramid of the Moon, though the analysis of the finds is ongoing. "We will now be able to dedicate our efforts more intensively in the material studies, analyses of different kinds, and in interpretation. We expect to publish the project results quickly," he said.

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