



Archaeologists uncover rare child sacrifice

Discovery unusual because body was found whole

AP Associated Press

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MEXICO CITY - Archaeologists digging through an Aztec temple say they've found a rare child sacrifice to the war god, a deity normally honored with the hearts or skulls of adult warriors.

The child found at Mexico City's Templo Mayor ruins was apparently killed sometime around 1450, in a sort of grim cornerstone ceremony intended to dedicate a new layer of building, according to archaeologist Ximena Chavez.

Priests propped the child — apparently already dead, since the sand around him showed no sign of movement — in a sitting position and workers packed earth around his body, which was then covered beneath a flight of stone temple steps.

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The skeletal remains of a young child lie at the Aztec ruins of the Templo Mayor in downtown Mexico City.

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Chavez said Friday there was no reference to child sacrifices to the war god Huitzilopochtli in accounts written by the Spaniards after the 1521 Conquest, showing the

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need for exhaustive digs to discover more about the long-controversial subject.

Some researchers say the Spaniards distorted or exaggerated accounts of human sacrifices by the Aztecs to justify their own brutal conquest; others defend the old accounts, but archeologists now say Mexico needs hard physical evidence to decide the truth.

"We are finding things here that writers of the earliest accounts did not mention, possibly because they were writing about things they didn't personally witness," said Chavez, of the National Institute of History and Anthropology.

"This child is unique," said Chavez, "because it is the first child dedicated to Huitzilopochtli." Warriors captured during battles with opposing cities were often sacrificed to the war god; in contrast, children have sometimes been found sacrificed to Tlaloc, the rain god.

The discovery announced Friday was also unusual because the child's body was found whole, and accompanied by whistles, collars, ankle bracelets of shells and copper bells — details normally reserved for honorific burials.

Many sacrifice victims had body parts removed or were dumped willy-nilly into pits.

Researchers are still working to determine with certainty the sex, age and cause of death of the child whose skeletal remains were found in the test trench. But the careful placement of the child's body — and the ceremonial objects found with him — are strong indications that the child was sacrificed.

Carmen Pijoan, a prominent forensic anthropologist who did not participate in the dig, said that child sacrifices are sometimes found whole, but that it did appear unusual for a child to be sacrificed to the war god.


Chavez said the child's killing had to be understood in the context of Aztec beliefs.

"They say this action of (human) sacrifice as a life-giving activity," she said, noting they thought the deaths would bring rain, help crops and give life to the community.

In recent years archaeologists have found mounting physical evidence that corroborates the Spanish accounts of human sacrifices in substance, but which indicates that some Spanish accounts exaggerated the number of victims.

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