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Evidence of Child Sacrifice at La Cueva de los Muertos Chiquitos (660-1430 AD)

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Abstract
The La Cueva de los Muertos Chiquitos site (AD 660-1430) is located just north of Durango, Mexico. A reanalysis of the human remains from this site, excavated in the 1950s by Sheilagh and Richard Brooks, has yielded important new information. This cave site contains at least 25 burials of infants and children (n=21 being 0-3 years of age) and at least three adult burials all associated with the Gabriel San Loma Cultural Phase. Using long bone lengths and radiographic analysis of dental development, age approximations for the subadults were obtained. All of the complete juvenile burials exhibit active cases of non-specific periosteal reactions on the cranium. Sixty percent of these burials also exhibit periosteal reactions on the long bones. In addition, porotic hyperostosis (n=7) and cribra orbitalia (n=5) are present. A number of cases of possible juvenile scurvy (n>5) were also identified.

Taphonomic indicators of the mortuary context revealed evidence of burning and sequenced internment involving matting, burial fabric, and intentional placement of burials provide evidence of ritualized burial treatment. Results from the analysis of coprolites and quids found in the cave (Reinhard, et al. 1988) provide additional information on diet and health. Large quantities of food and extralocal jewelry was also a part of the ritual offering. Vegetative data noting the presence of botanicals used for drug production at the site (Foster 1984), suggests that an unusual occurrence such as ritual sacrifice likely precipitated the deaths of up to 25 infants and children.

Keywords
Bioarchaeology, Ritual Sacrifice, Mexico

Author Biography
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Evidence from Tepehuan Ethnography
- Accounts of the Tepehuan, likely descendants of the Gabriel San Loma of Zape, document practices of child sacrifice associated with rituals related to agriculture (Pennington 1969: 244, 251)
- One Jesuit’s 17th century account notes that (particularly ill) children were often sacrificed to cure others and to ensure a bountiful harvest (Pérez de Ribas 1645 [1944]: 3, 159).
- Children are often sacrificed in ways utilizing drowning or suffocation in rivers (Pennington 1969). Such methods are unlikely to result in skeletal changes.

Archaeological Evidence: Mortuary Offerings with the Burials

Archaeological Evidence
- Quantity of well-made artifacts and ‘offerings’ with ceremonial purpose.
- Location & architecture used to preserve bodies.

Ethnographic Evidence
- Accounts of the Tepehuan, likely descendants of the Gabriel San Loma of Zape, document practices of child sacrifice associated with rituals related to agriculture (Pennington 1969: 244, 251)

Environmental Evidence
- Evidence from Tepehuan Ethnography
  - Accounts of the Tepehuan, likely descendants of the Gabriel San Loma of Zape, document practices of child sacrifice associated with rituals related to agriculture (Pennington 1969: 244, 251)

Sacrifice?

Mortuary Program and Skeletal Evidence

Artefacts: Children were buried with items of cultural significance such as shells, beads, and fragments of cloth.

Pillows & Blankets: Children were placed on woven mats with pillows and buried in rows in at least two groups.

Figure 3: Preliminary health and disease conditions observed among complete burials.

Figure 2: Ages at death of discrete burials present.

Figure 1: Lines of evidence suggesting ritual sacrifice at La Cueva de los Muertos Chiquitos. Summarized from Brooks & Brooks 1978; Brooks et al. 1985; Pennington 1969.

Rio Zapopan River Valley: The cave overlooked this dry river bed. The region is known to have experienced droughts and resource shortages.

Cave Entrance: The opening of the cave would have provided a view of the valley & river area below.

The location, difficulty in access and region of the cave all suggest that its use in ritual was likely.

Environmental marginality could have been a factor in rituals involving child sacrifices.

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