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 (Perez de Ribas 1645 [1944: 3, 155]).
- 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

- Rituals often associated w/ agriculture & harvest.
- Ethnographic Evidence

Desert Valley site - area of frequent drought. Cave sites rarely used as habitations by Gabriel San Loma.

Environmental Evidence

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

- Skeletal Evidence
- Lack of Taphonomic changes.

- Pathology suggests great in-utero stress.
- High number of infants and children present.
- Sacrifice?

Archaeological Evidence: Mortuary Offerings with the Burials

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

Artifacts: Children were buried with bowls, tools and intricate extralocal shell & turquoise.

Carvings: Elaborate grave goods included with ritual burial include a tortoise carving.

Maps of La Cueva de los Muertos Chiquitos. From Brooks et al. 1962, Fig. 1 and 2.

Project Overview

Reanalysis of human remains from La Cueva de los Muertos Chiquitos (used from 600-1400 AD) reveals evidence of a highly ritualized, intentional burial program in precolonial NW Mexico. Ethnographic evidence indicates that infant and child remains (25/30 individuals analysed) are the result of ceremonial actions likely related to a cultural ideology linking infant and child sacrifice with the renewal of crops and other resources.

Multiple lines of evidence illustrate this link and provide insight into Gabriel San Loma cultural practices and beliefs but demonstrate the role of children as symbolic currency in the exchange between the Gabriel San Loma and the forces they believed ensured their sustenance. A summary of the findings from this reanalysis demonstrates the important use of taphonomy in interpreting the meaning of burial programs.

Environmental Evidence

- Rio Zape 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 & Over 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.

Mortuary Program and Skeletal Evidence

- Natural Mummification. Fiber wrappings used to contain children assisted in preserving their bodies.

- A number of factors aided in the preservation of the burials, and these included the adobe and mud floors and the use of ollas and petate mats – all indicators of elaborate deposit.

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