

Research Team Finds Evidence Cacao Ritually Used in Chaco Canyon

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Chaco Cylinders

(PhysOrg.com) -- Inhabitants of Chaco Canyon apparently drank chocolate from cylinders like these about a thousand years ago. That's the finding in a paper published this week by PNAS, a publication of the National Academy of Science and written by Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Patricia L. Crown and her Collaborator at the Hershey Center of Health and Nutrition W. Jeffrey Hurst.

Crown has long been fascinated by ceramic cylinders excavated at Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon excavated in the Hyde Exploring Expedition from 1896-1899 and the National Geographic Society Expedition from 1920 to 1927. Only about 200 of the cylinders exist and

most were found in a single room at the site. The cylinders are now housed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. and at the American Museum of Natural History.

Archaeologists generally agree the vessels were used for some ritual, but there has been great disagreement about the specific use of the vessels. Crown was thinking about how the Maya drank chocolate from ceramic cylinders, and wondered whether the cylinders found at Chaco might have been used in the same way. It was clear that the Maya used the cylinders for chocolate. Experts could read the glyphs on the vessels that made it clear they were chocolate containers.

From 2004-2007 UNM graduate and undergraduate students had excavated the trash middens directly south of Pueblo Bonito and uncovered thousands of pottery fragments that could be used for analysis. Crown selected sherds that were from cylinders or pitchers. She could tell they were dated between 1000 and 1125 A.D. based on the decorative style. She selected a few sherds and worked with a graduate student to grind off the edges for testing, then sent the material to W. Jeffrey Hurst at the Hershey Center. He tested the powder using an analytical method he had developed and found the presence of theobromine, a marker for *Theobroma cacao* or chocolate.

The finding is the first concrete evidence that the people of Chaco Canyon or anywhere in the Southwestern U.S. traded for cacao beans. It's long been known there was trade with the Maya in the southern lowlands of Mexico from evidence of copper bells, cloisonné and skeletons of scarlet macaws. Until this discovery, cacao had been found no further north than central Mexico.

Crown says anthropologists don't know whether the people at Chaco walked to Mesoamerica to trade for the cacao beans or whether traders brought them north or whether the beans simply passed from hand to

hand from one group of people to another.

What we do know now is people who live in the Southwest have been drinking and savoring chocolate for the last thousand years, and today at 11 a.m. students at UNM will be able to sample a version of the chocolate drink.

Owner of the Kakawa Chocolate House in Santa Fe and local chocolate historian Mark Sciscenti has created a recipe for Mayan Chocolate from the ingredients the Mayans were known to have used.

Provided by University of New Mexico

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