

The Teotihuacans exhumed their dead and dignified them with make-up

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This shows the Avenue of the Dead City of Teotihuacan. Credit: Hector García

In collaboration with the National University of Mexico, a team of Spanish researchers has analysed for the first time remains of cosmetics in the graves of prehispanic civilisations on the American continent. In the case of the Teotihuacans, these cosmetics were used as part of the after-death ritual to honour their city's most important people.

A research team from the Polytechnic University of Valencia and the University of Valencia has studied various funerary samples found in urns in the Teotihuacan archaeological site (Mexico) that date from between 200 and 500 AD.

The scientists have been researching Mayan [wall paintings](#) in Mexico and Guatemala since 2006. Published in the '[Journal of Archaeological Science](#)', this project came about after contact on various occasions with other researchers in the area, namely the National University of Mexico, who wanted to know the composition and function of the cosmetics found in pots.

"The conclusion that we have reached, given the structure of the pigments found, is that they are remains of cosmetics that were used in rituals following burial. At that time it was common to periodically practice a kind of remembrance worship of the deceased high nobility," as explained to SINC by María Teresa Domenech Carbo, director of the University Institute of Heritage Restoration of the Polytechnic University of Valencia and lead author of the study.

In these rituals the high priest of the city would conduct a ceremony in the dwelling of the most noble of citizens (nobility, princes and kings). The reason for this is that unlike today where graves are located in special places, in those days the deceased were buried underneath the floor of their homes.

"The priest would go to the home and would pay homage to the deceased with the family present. Cosmetics were used by the priest carrying out the ceremony and formed a part of the ritual. The remains of carbonaceous particles found lead to the belief that aromatic material were burnt, with the priest painting parts of the body with those pigments. In addition, it is probable that the body was removed and 'redecorated' too," explains Domenech.

Furthermore, the researchers outline that although we could think that these materials in the urns belonged to the deceased in life and were put in the grave to accompany their owner into the 'new life', as in the case of the Egyptians, the fact that the make-up did not contain any agglutinative substance (an organic vehicle that allows make-up to stick to the face or body) leads us to believe that they had more of a symbolic nature.

"It is not very frequent to find cosmetic products in archaeological excavations in America. These are the first on this continent to be analysed in a serious and systematic way," ensures the researcher. In Europe and Africa, mainly in countries such as Italy and Egypt, the analysis of cosmetic products is more common. Teotihuacan is one of the most important and most visited archaeological sites in Mexico thanks to its close location to Mexico City and its spectacular great Mayan pyramid.

Flowing trade in Prehispanic Mexico

As well as providing more knowledge on the funerary rituals of this millennium-old culture, the cosmetic remains found help us to identify the social relevance of the buried individuals and they prove the existence of fluid commerce between the different areas of Mexico. The scientists found material coming from the surroundings of Teotihuacan, such as pulverised volcanic rock [pigments](#) and other clay-like types typical of the area's geology.

Nonetheless, some remains, such as those mica and jarosite particles found, are not native to the surroundings and were probably imported from different parts of Mexico. This, in turn, confirms the existence of trade. "No surprise since this city dominated the entire Mesoamerican region and it has been shown that fluid trade existed in certain southern areas," points out the researcher.

In addition, the appearance of these remains with the body of the deceased indicates their social status. "Unless the person was very important to this civilisation they were not buried with [cosmetic products](#). The deceased would have had to hold an important position in society, such as that of a king, a prince or a high noble," ensures the expert.

Following this study, the research team analysed another collection of cosmetic material in the region of Guatemala. The results are currently awaiting publication.

More information: María Teresa Doménech-Carbó, María Luisa Vázquez de Agredos-Pascual, Laura Osete-Cortina, Antonio Doménech-Carbó , Núria Guasch-Ferré , Linda R. Manzanilla , Cristina Vidal-Lorenzo. "Characterization of prehispanic cosmetics found in a burial of the ancient city of Teotihuacan (Mexico)" *Journal of Archaeological Science* 39: 1043 – 1062, 2012.

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