

Ancient mysteries unveiled at Peru's Temple of Fire

February 13 2013, by Marie Sanz



Archaeologists work at the El Paraiso archaeological site in Lima on February 14, 2013. The recent discovery of a ceremonial fireplace believed to be more than 5,000 years old sheds light on one of the oldest populated sites in the Americas.

The recent discovery of a ceremonial fireplace believed to be more than 5,000 years old sheds light on one of the oldest populated sites in the Americas.

The fireplace, dubbed the Temple of Fire, was discovered within the El Paraiso archeological complex in the Chillón valley, located just outside the bustling Peruvian capital.

Archeologists say the site is comparable in age to Caral, the oldest pre-Columbian site in the Americas that was inhabited between 2,600 - 2,100 BC. Caral is located some 200 kilometers (125 miles) to the north and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The fireplace was found when archeologists discovered a narrow entrance on a wing of El Paraiso's central pyramid in January, when they were removing sand and stones.

"We quickly realized the importance of this discovery," said Marco Guillen, the head archeologist at the site.

The entrance, measuring some 48 centimeters (19-inches) wide, leads to a chamber measuring eight by six meters (26 by 20 feet) where shellfish, grains, flowers and fruit were burned as offerings.

The stone walls inside "were covered with a fine coating of yellow soil, with traces of red paint," Guillen said. "The smoke allowed the priests to connect with the gods."

The temple has four levels, "each one older than the other," Guillen said.

The find shows that the Andean world was more closely connected than previously thought—this early construction set a blueprint reproduced in the ancient mountain chain civilizations for the centuries to come.

The central pyramid is the only building uncovered in El Paraiso. Experts say there are 10 "architectural units" at the site that include temples, plazas and residences.

Archeologists believe that the central pyramid had a communal use, while two other structures—which at a glance look like sandy hills—include buildings that appear to be homes.

"We know little about the other units, because they have not yet been studied," said Luis Caceres, head of archeology at the Ministry of Culture.

El Paraiso is spread across 50 hectares (125 acres) about two kilometers (1.2 miles) from the Pacific Ocean.

At the center of the site are stone platforms discovered by French archeologist Frederic Engel in 1965. Today parts of the archeological zone has been taken over by farmers and urban squatters, though locals have banded together to stop further encroachment.

Evidence uncovered by Engel lead experts to estimate that some 3,000 people could have lived in El Paraiso, Guillen said. Experts are currently analyzing waste samples to find out what they ate.

Archeologists believe the ancient coastal civilizations raised crops including cotton, which they traded with coastal fishermen for food.

The discovery "demonstrates the importance of Lima from time immemorial," long before the arrival of Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro, who founded the Peruvian capital in 1535, Deputy Culture Minister Rafael Varon told reporters when the discovery was announced on Tuesday.

"There is a lot to discover in order to untangle the mysteries held at El Paraiso," Guillen told AFP. "We need to know if below these structures there are even older ones."

"We just began and already found the Temple of Fire," he said.

The government of President Ollanta Humala has allocated \$1.8 million over the next five years for research at the site.

(c) 2013 AFP

Citation: Ancient mysteries unveiled at Peru's Temple of Fire (2013, February 13) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-02-peru-archeologists-ancient-temple.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.