

Panama's pre-Hispanic golden artifacts stored out of sight

November 16 2017, by Kathia Martinez



In this May 7, 2016 photo, pottery pieces discovered at El Cano archaeological site are displayed at the Fundacion el Caño, in Panama City, Panama. The pottery pieces were found in extensive pre-Columbian graves, some containing remains of as many as 42 people, starting in 2006 at El Cano. The elaborate tombs were constructed between 900 and 1020 AD by a largely unknown culture in an archaeological region known as Gran Cocle. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)

Nine years ago, a trove of intricate gold artifacts were uncovered at a

little-known archaeological site in Panama. The treasures dating from over 1,000 years ago included gold beads, strange ceramic pots, and chest plates engraved with delicate designs in forms such as a squid and human face.

But since their discovery by archaeologist Julia Mayo in 2008, those artifacts have also sat in bank vaults and preservation offices in Panama City, leaving the country's little-known archaeological heritage an unintentionally well-guarded secret because the country has no archaeological museum.

Despite Panama's growing commerce and tourism industry, visitors have little opportunity to find out about the country's rich past.

That has left dozens of the startlingly beautiful pieces largely hidden from public view, even as the number of visitors flocking to see the country's skyscraper-studded capital and massive interoceanic canal has more than doubled from 1.1 million in 2011 to 2.6 million in 2016.

The artifacts, which were found in extensive graves at the Necropolis of El Cano, a site 115 miles (185 kilometers) west of Panama City, include jewelry and decorative objects interred in rich burial offerings.

The tombs, some containing remains of as many as 42 people, were constructed between 700 and 1020 AD by a largely unknown people in an archaeological region known as Gran Cocle.



In this May 7, 2016 photo, monoliths discovered in El Cano archaeological site are displayed at Fundacion el Caño in Panama. Panama's archaeological heritage remains little known, despite the fact that researchers unearthed an amazing hoard of gold pre-Hispanic artifacts a decade ago. The anthropomorphic sculptures were discovered in the 1920's. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)

As experts have worked to understand their cultural significance, however, they have also begun to turn their attention to establishing a permanent home for them.

Officials are working to remodel a now-closed archaeological museum in downtown Panama City and to open a site at the ruins to put the artifacts on display.

Panama City's Reina Torres de Arauz Museum was closed five years ago and is awaiting repairs, but is expected to be reopened in 2019.



In this March 2010 photo provided by Fundacion El Cano, a gold pectoral with a design of a squid is displayed at the Foundation el Cano in Panama City. Hammered gold bracelets and chest plates are engraved with delicate designs, some suggesting surprising forms: a squid, and a smiling, fanged face. There are gold beads, and strange ceramic pots with human features. (Fundacion El Cano via AP)

Orlando Hernandez, museum coordinator for the National Culture Institute, said the country's museums have long been in decline.

"The public is seeing the imperative necessity for Panama to have some museums that reflect the economic development that we have, but it is an old problem for almost 40 years and we can't fix it one day to the next," he said.

Panama is currently the only Central American country without such a

museum.

As a temporary fix in the meantime, officials hope to spruce up a small [museum](#) at the excavation site that could be used to display some of the discoveries.



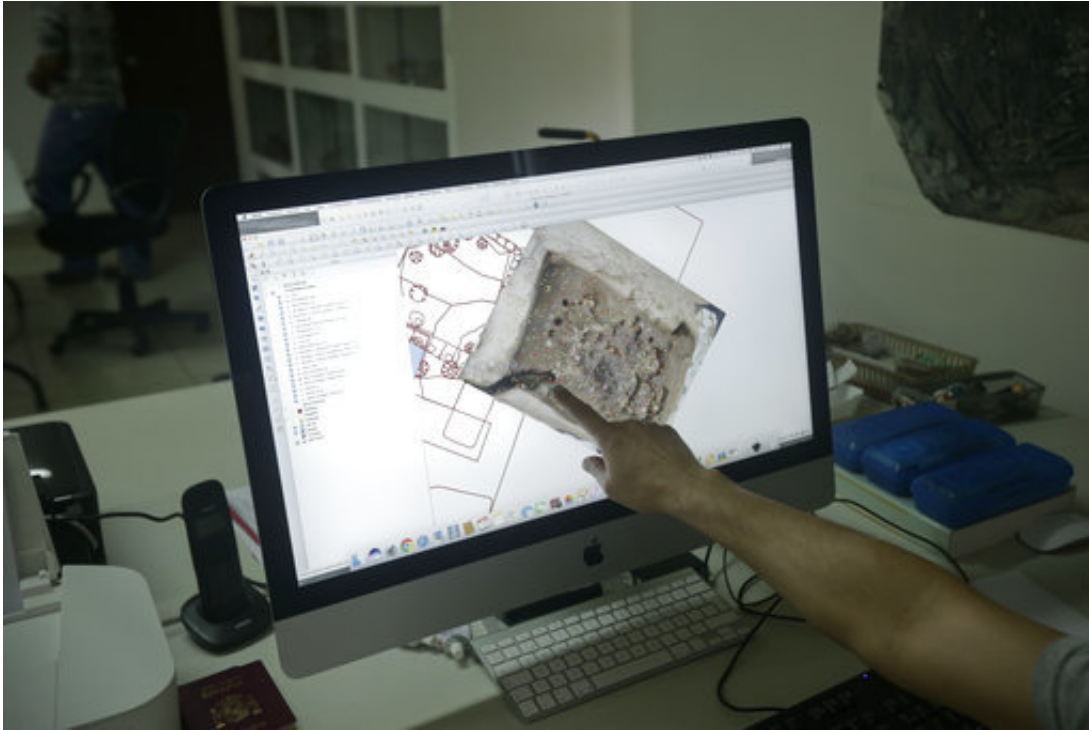
This Sept. 2009 photo provided by Fundacion El Cano, shows a gold earring discovered at the El Cano archaeological site, in Panama City. Hammered gold bracelets and chest plates are engraved with delicate designs, some suggesting surprising forms: a squid, and a smiling, fanged face. There are gold beads, and strange ceramic pots with human features. (Fundacion El Cano via AP)



In this April 2013 photo provided by the Fundacion El Cano, two men take photographs of a tomb at the archaeological site in El Cano, Panama. The elaborate tombs were constructed between 900 and 1020 AD by a largely unknown culture in an archaeological region known as Gran Cocle. (Fundacion El Cano via AP)



In this May 7, 2016 photo, Dr. Julia Mayo shows a stone axe discovered at El Cano archaeological site, at the Fundacion el Caño, in Panama City. The stone axe is about 1000 years old. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



In this Sept. 19, 2017 photo, Carlos Mayo points to the location where artifacts were discovered at El Cano archaeological site, in a laboratory at the Foundation El Cano in Panama City. After moldering for centuries in an offering-filled grave pit in the ruins of the Necropolis of El Cano, startlingly beautiful pieces are now hidden from public view in bank vaults or at a research facility. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



This Sept. 19, 2017 photo shows reconstructed pottery discovered in El Cano archaeological site, ready to be stored in a laboratory at the Fundacion El Cano, in Panama City. The pottery dates from between 900-1020 AD. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



This Sept. 19, 2017 photo shows a partiallyreconstructed bowl discovered in El Cano archaeological site, in a laboratory at the Foundation El Cano, in Panama City. The bowl dates from about 750-900 AD. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



This Sept. 19, 2017 photo shows a reconstructed pottery piece at the Fundacion EL Cano in Panama City. The piece was found in a tomb at El Cano archeological site and it dates from about 900-1020 AD. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



In this May 7, 2016 photo, a pottery piece discovered in El Cano archaeological site is displayed at Fundacion el Cano, in Panama City. This ceramic pottery is decorated with geometric designs and it dates from about 900-1020 AD. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



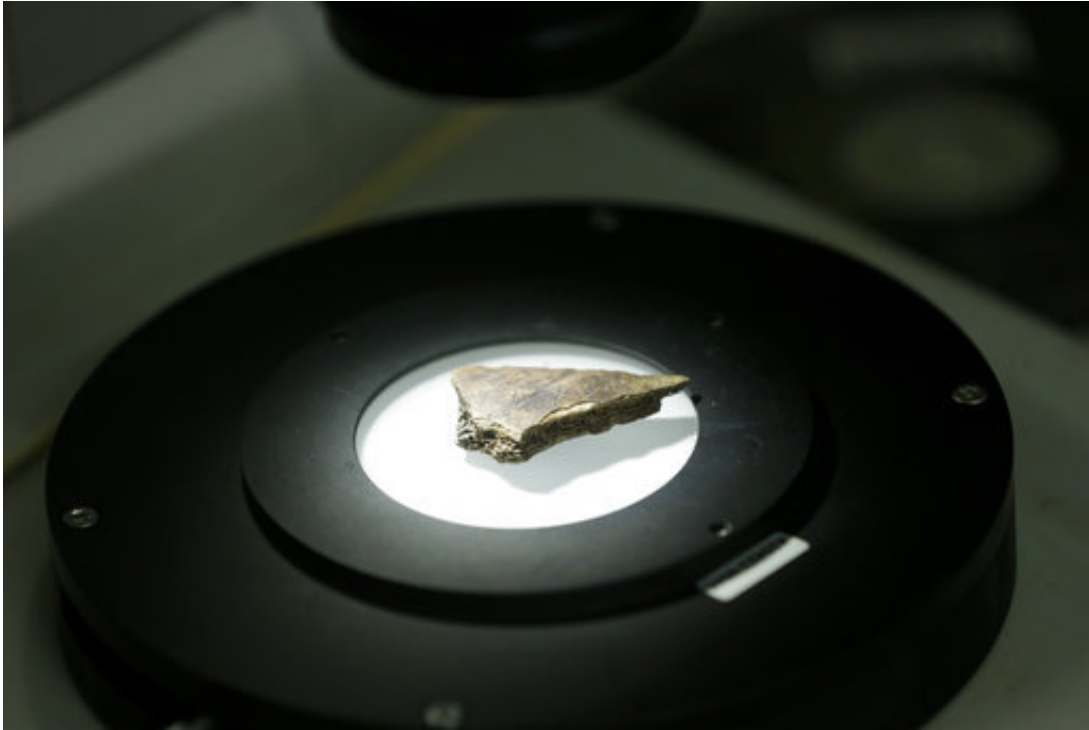
This Sept. 19, 2017 photo shows pottery with pre-hispanic designs discovered at El Cano archaeological site in a laboratory at El Cano Foundation, in Panama City. The pieces date from about 900-1020 AD. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



In this May 7, 2016 photo, Dr Julia Mayo shows a monolith discovered in El Cano archaeological site, at the Fundacion el Cano, in Panama City. Archaeologists have discovered a trove of spectacular gold artifacts from a sophisticated pre-Colombian civilization in Panama. But few people so far have been able to see them. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



In Sept. 19, 2017 photo, a worker pieces together shards of pottery that were discovered at El Cano archaeological site, at the Fundacion El Cano in Panama City. Panama's archaeological heritage remains little known, despite the fact that researchers unearthed an amazing hoard of gold pre-Hispanic artifacts a decade ago. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



In this Sept. 19, 2017 photo, a pottery shard is examined under a microscope to be identified and classified in a laboratory at the Fundacion El Cano in Panama City. Nine years ago, a trove of treasures dating from over 1,000 years ago were discovered at a little-known archaeological site in Panama. But since their discovery, the artifacts have sat in bank vaults and preservation offices in Panama City, leaving the country's little-known archaeological heritage an unintentionally well-guarded secret because the country has no archaeological museum. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)



In this Oct. 16, 2017 photo, people walk in front of the Reina Torres de Arauz Anthropology Museum, in Panama City. The museum was closed five years ago and is awaiting repairs, but is expected to be reopened in 2019. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco)

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