

# More than 140 children may have had hearts removed in ancient sacrifice in Peru

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Mummified children. Credit: John Verano (2019)

Anthropologists have found evidence of a mass ritual killing that involved the deaths of more than 140 children, three adults, and at least 200 young llamas on the northern coast of Peru.

The archaeological site, known as Huanchaquito-Las Llamas, represents one of the largest known cases of mass child sacrifice ever seen in the Americas.

Gabriel Prieto, a professor of archaeology from the National University of Trujillo who started excavating Huanchaquito-Las Llamas in 2011, said the discovery shocked him and his colleagues.

"In Peru we are familiar with human bones, but in this particular case there were so many skeletons and they were all children," he said. "It was astonishing."

The sacrificial victims ranged in age from 6 to 14, and appear to have been killed in a well-planned and choreographed event on a single, horrific day. Their mummified bones were found carefully arranged with their heads facing the ocean and their feet facing the mountains. Many of their remains were found with the bones of one or two young llamas lying on top of them.

The children, both boys and girls, all appear to have been killed in the same way—with a single horizontal slice across the sternum.

As if all this wasn't gruesome enough, researchers say that many of the children's rib cages appear to have been pried apart. This suggests that their hearts were removed shortly after they died.

"We can't prove it, but certainly in the Mayan world they described the importance of taking out a heart that was still beating," said John Verano, an anthropologist at Tulane University in New Orleans and one of the leaders of the research, published Wednesday in *PLOS One*.

According to radiocarbon dating of the excavated skeletons, the sacrificial event took place around 1450, when the complex and

hierarchical Chimu empire ruled the region. The empire flourished from the 11th to the 15th century. At its height it stretched along more than 600 miles of coastline, from the present-day border of Peru and Ecuador south to the modern city of Lima.

The Chimu oversaw an agricultural society that relied on a sophisticated network of hydraulic canals to irrigate fields. The capital city Chan Chan, located a few miles from where the city of Trujillo now sits, included palaces and gardens, plazas and temples. It was one of the largest urban settlements in the Americas.

The Huanchaquito-Las Llamas site is about two miles north of Chan Chan, less than a quarter-mile from the ocean. It was discovered in 2011 when residents noticed human and llama bones in eroding sand dunes along newly constructed roads in the area.

Prieto lobbied Peru's Ministry of Culture to conduct an emergency excavation before any more archaeological material was lost, and his request was swiftly granted. Later, he and Verano were able to secure additional funding, including from the National Geographic Society, to go back to the site in 2014 and 2016.

In that first excavation season, Prieto and his team unearthed 43 children and 74 llamas. Almost immediately he knew it was not just a regular burial ground.

The children had been arranged lying on their sides rather than in a seated position, the more traditional burial posture in the Chimu culture. Not one of them was wearing a necklace of shell beads, and there were no ceramic offerings buried along with them. Some of the older children's faces had been stained red with a face-paint made from cinnabar and were buried wearing ceremonial headdresses.

"It was not typical of any burials we know," Verano said.

And then there was that sure-handed cut across the sternum on body after body, including on many of the llamas.

Anthropologists have known for decades that the Chimu occasionally engaged in mass killings. In the 1970s archaeologists working in Chan Chan found the remains of hundreds of young women who were sacrificed to attend to the king after his death. Researchers have also found the bones of 200 victims—including children, adults and the elderly—who were executed by Chimu warriors sometime around 1300.

But the discovery of a massive ritual sacrifice of children was something new.

Melissa Murphy, an anthropologist at the University of Wyoming who was not involved in the new work, said that while other researchers had found evidence of child sacrifice and mass killings in the region, the sheer size of this event and the fatal wounds set it apart.





Mummified children. Credit: John Verano (2019)

"This finding is unique for its scale, for the different technique, and for the Chimú," she said.

Anthropologists don't know much about the Chimú belief system. There is no written record of their religion, and because most of their art is symbolic rather than representational, it provides only a few hints about their religious practices. There are a few tapestries that depict mass killings, but these appear to show prisoners of war, not children.

Still, the authors of the PLOS One report say that a clue to what might have precipitated the bloody event at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas lies in

the site itself.

The researchers note that the children and llamas were buried in a thick layer of mud that lay on top of the sand. This suggests that the sacrifice occurred after heavy rains caused flooding and mudslides in the area. Perhaps this epic sacrifice was designed to stop the rains.

The northern coast of Peru is generally dry and arid, but occasionally El Nino conditions bring heavy rains and flooding to the area. This shift could have caused catastrophic damage to the Chimu food supply.

"We think that a massive rain was destroying the economy and the political structure of the Chimu and the sacrifice was their reaction," Prieto said. "We'll never know the true meaning of this sacrifice, but our interpretation was they felt like they were contributing something to solve the problem by giving up their most valuable resource—the life of their children."

Haagen Klaus, an anthropologist at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., who was not involved in the work, said he had little doubt that the sacrifice was a response to the rains.

"When it rains in the north coast of Peru it is almost like the world is upside down," he said. "Flooding would cause the displacement of people and the disruption of economic systems."

His own research into ritual sacrifice suggests that it is often performed as a way to negotiate with entities that are believed to control natural events.

"In these societies it was the ancestors who controlled water, and in this part of the world water is life," he said. "An offering that will appease the ancestors may have been seen as necessary to bring the world back

into balance."

The researchers have determined that the children were all in good health at the time of their death, and that they likely came from a range of geographic and ethnic communities in the Chimu empire.

By looking to other ancient cultures that practiced child sacrifice, like the Aztecs, Prieto concludes that the children were likely treated especially well in the months leading up to their deaths.

"We know that in Mexico children were prepared for at least six months, given special meals and foods, as well as rehearsals as to how they should behave at the event," he said.

Prieto thinks the three adults found on the site may have been tasked with taking care of the children ahead of the sacrifice.

The adults included two women and one man. Unlike the kids, their sternums had not been sliced, and their ribs had not been spread. One of the women appears to have died due to blunt force trauma to the back of her head. The other woman suffered a blow to the front of her head, but it is not clear that it killed her. The authors say that the man's ribs were broken, but that it is possible it happened after his death.

"I believe these two women and the man were part of a group that was babysitting the kids, and were buried with them at some point," Prieto said. "We didn't say that in the paper, but my feeling is that they were so closely related to the children that the organizers of the ceremony decided—if they go, you go too."

Verano said there is still more work to be done at the site. He, Prieto and their collaborators plan to do further analysis on the skeletons, hoping to reveal more about who these children were—what geographic regions

they came from, what they ate, and what ethnic communities they represented.

At the same time, Prieto has started excavating another site at nearby Pampa La Cruz, where he has already found 132 kids and 250 llamas. It's a grisly find that leads to an even more grisly conclusion about the mass ritual killing of children at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas.

This happened more than once.

**More information:** Prieto G, Verano JW, Goepfert N, Kennett D, Quilter J, LeBlanc S, et al. (2019) A mass sacrifice of children and camelids at the Huanchaquito-Las Llamas site, Moche Valley, Peru. *PLoS ONE* 14(3): e0211691. [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0211691](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0211691)

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