

DEATH IN THE ANDES

A burial site at 6,700 meters is giving scientists the best look yet at grisly Incan sacrificial rites

By MICHAEL D. LEMONICK

BY MODERN STANDARDS, THE HOSTILE summit of Mount Lullaillo, in the Argentine Andes, is no place for kids. The ancient Inca saw things differently though, and so it was that one day, some 500 years ago, three children ascended the frigid and treacherous upper slopes of the 6,700-m peak. The three had spent time at the 5,200-m level, taking part in rituals that can only be guessed at. Now, accompanied by a retinue of adults, they moved steadily upward. They would not return. Once at the summit, the children—two girls and a boy, between eight and 15 years old—would be ritually sacrificed and entombed beneath 1.5 m of rocky rubble. They may even have been buried alive.

And there the story might have ended but for the tireless efforts of Johan Reinhard, an independent archaeologist funded by the National Geographic Society. Reinhard's specialty is scaling the Andes in search of sacrificial remains; he had already located 15 bodies, including the famed ice maiden he found in 1995. But these three, whose discovery he announced last week, are by far the most impressive. They were frozen solid within hours of their burial. Two of the bodies are almost perfectly preserved; the third was evidently damaged by lightning. The children's internal organs are not only intact but also still contain blood. Says Craig Morris, an expert on Andean archaeology at New York City's American Museum of Natural History: "It is truly a fantastic discovery."

What makes it so fantastic is not just

the bodies themselves, but also the wealth of artifacts that were buried along with them: 36 gold and silver statues, small woven bags, a ceramic vessel, leather sandals, a small llama figure and seashell necklaces. One of the girls, says Reinhard, "has a beautiful yellow, geometrically designed cover laid over her." Her head sports a plume of feathers and a golden mask.

Some of the bodies were provisioned with bundles of food wrapped in alpaca skin, which indicates that the children came from the Incan social elite—not surprising, since only people of high status would have been considered worthy of sacrifice. Little is known about the sacrificial ceremony itself; these objects, along with others found at the lower camp, should tell archaeologists plenty.

The preserved bodies, meanwhile, will give scientists an unprecedented look at Incan physiology.

Reinhard and his team took care to pack the children in plastic, snow and insulating foam before hauling them down the mountain, and the Argentine military whisked them off to the nearby town of Salta. There, experts will analyze their stomachs to find out what they ate for their last meal, their organs for clues about their diet and their DNA to try and establish their relationship to other ethnic groups. Reinhard will head back into the mountains. There is no telling how many more bodies remain to be found.

—Reported by Ivan Briscoe/Buenos Aires and Alice Park/New York



OSVALDO FREILAS—CONTRASTO, EL TREINTEN

JOHAN REINHARD, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



Scale is accurate for east-west measurements only. North-south distances are twice as long. Mountains are vertically exaggerated.

DES

THIN-AIR SCIENCE:
On Mount Lullullaco's
summit, Reinhard prepares
two of the three mummified
children for further study.
A closer look, opposite,
shows how beautifully the
frigid conditions preserved
the young bodies

