

A Gift from the Gods

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For over a decade, American anthropologist Johan Reinhard has scaled Andean peaks towering over 6,000 meters above sea level searching for sanctuaries built more than 500 years ago by the Incas.

His explorations have taken him to the Andes of Chile and Peru, where in September he discovered the frozen body of a young Inca girl, who had apparently been sacrificed to the mountain gods and buried near the summit of Mt. Ampato in Arequipa.

The information from this find—many such sites have been looted and few scientifically excavated—will shed new knowledge on Inca ritual, while studies of preserved organs, tissues and body fluids could reveal new insights on Inca health and nutrition.

Reinhard and other scholars have recorded some fifty sites in the Andes located over 5,200 meters above sea level and some perched as high as 6,700 meters. "Nowhere else on earth have archaeological remains been found at such altitudes," says Reinhard, who describes them as one of the "most awesome accomplishments known from ancient times."

The sites are often only rows of stones or low walls enclosing earthen platforms. Some are more elaborate and include shelters that housed those who took part in the ceremonies, as well as llama corrals and trails leading to the summit.

Discovering Juanita

The ancient ceremonies on Mt. Ampato, a volcano towering 6,300 meters above sea level in Arequipa's Cailloma province, probably occurred sometime between 1450 and 1532, when the Spanish conquistadors invaded the Inca empire.

A prolonged drought may have exposed the snow-covered summit or a volcanic eruption may have showered the region with ash that contaminated water sources and withered crops and pastures. No doubt such a disaster caused great anguish and sparked the rites and sacrifices to the mountain gods.

The events which provoked the Inca sacrifice may have been similar to those which allowed twentieth-century discovery. According to Reinhard, hot volcanic ash from nearly Mt. Sabancaya, which began erupted five years ago, probably melted Ampato's icecap. Had it not been for the volcanic activity on Sabancaya, the structures on Ampato would have remained covered in ice forever, he says.

"I figured the mountain was permanently snowcapped," Reinhard says. But when he and his climbing partner Miguel Zarate neared the summit after an arduous ascent in early September—including a torturous trek across an ice field littered with sharp pinnacles—they found Ampato nearly free of ice.

Suddenly, Reinhard says, they spied feathers sticking out of the 45-degree slope below a ridge leading to the summit. They knew that the feathers could only signal one thing: the plumed headdresses that festoon the metal or shell figurines offered by the Incas to the mountain gods.

Scrambling down the slope and carefully brushing away the earth, they saw that the feathers topped a two-inch-high gold female figurine wrapped in finely-woven miniature clothing; nearby lay two other female figurines of silver and Spondylus shell, loosely covered in gravel.

Later, Reinhard discovered that the earthen (sic) platform built by the Incas on the summit ridge had slipped down the slope when the ridge collapsed, carrying the figurines toward Ampato's crater and tumbling the frozen body of a young Inca girl, still encased in ice, out of her tomb.

But Reinhard, who has excavated mountaintop ruins in Chile and on Picchu Picchu near Arequipa, was in a quandary. Since he didn't have a permit he couldn't excavate, but he wasn't going to leave the mummy—nicknamed "Juanita"—or the figurines exposed to volcanic ash, strong sunlight and snowfall. Worse yet, he couldn't leave them to treasure-seeking mountain climbers, who have plundered many high altitude Andean sanctuaries.

"As archaeologists we have an obligation to save Peru's cultural heritage," he says, responding to criticism from the director of Peru's National Institute of Culture, INC, who says Reinhard should have left the finds on Ampato and only retrieve them when he had a permit.

"No way was I going to leave the mummy or those statues," Reinhard recalls. It was only when he tried to lift Juanita that he realized she was still frozen, but her face, exposed to the sunlight, had begun to desiccate (sic). Although she is third frozen mummy discovered in the Andes, Juanita is the only mummy to remain frozen.

"You're at 20,000 feet, you've had nothing to eat, it's snowing and it's getting dark," says Reinhard, recalling the day they found Juanita. The two men decided to leave her and return the following day. "Getting her down was a saga."

As Zarate dug steps into the steep, ice-covered slope, Reinhard, with forty kilos of Juanita perched on his backpack, descended Mt. Ampato.

Halfway down, Zarate went ahead to fetch the muleteer who was waiting for them at the base of the mountain. They loaded Juanita on the donkey, covering her in sleeping pads (sic) to insulate her against the burro's warmth.

For thirteen hours, the three men, "with only a ten-minute break and a tin of sardines," walked until they reached Cabanaconde, a small town in the Colca valley. Zarate took a bus to Arequipa with Juanita bundled in the luggage compartment. "She just looked like a big bundle—much too heavy for anyone to steal," says Reinhard. Clutching the figurines, he followed in another bus. In Arequipa, Zarate found a freezer large enough to accommodate Juanita and handed her over to archaeologists at the Universidad Católica de Santa María.

After weeks of negotiations with the INC for a permit to excavate the Ampato sanctuary, Reinhard, a team of archaeologists from Arequipa's Universidad Católica and a film crew from the National Geographic Society, which funded the excavations, returned to Ampato.

Much to Reinhard's surprise, they discovered pits below the summit that contained two other bodies, both young children.

To ease the excavations in the rockhard permafrost, the archaeologists melted snow and poured the boiling water around the pits to thaw the ground.

One of the bodies is shrouded in a feather headdress that has fallen over the face, molding it. The other body is a skeleton; both are too young to determine their sex. In one of the tombs archaeologists unearthed fifty ceramic bowls, forty of which are intact, as well as keros, wooden beakers used to drink chicha, maize beer, and another seven figurines.

Below the summit the crew found remains of the camp built by the people who conducted the ceremonies and sacrificed Juanita and the two other children—an area strewn with ichu grass, llama dung, charcoal, sandals and the remains of poles that probably supported a tent.

Mountain worship

But what spurred the Incas to scale this Mt. Ampato—without oxygen or modern climbing equipment—build the sanctuary and carry out rites and sacrifices on the summit?

Scholars have long known that the Incas and other Andean peoples worshipped mountains. Some people considered the mountains as their ancestors where the souls of the dead went to reside.

Others, especially the highest peaks, says Reinhard, were believed to control weather. This, he explains, is based on sound observations: clouds gather on mountains and clouds bring rain, snow, frost, hail, thunder and lightning.

For a people who depended on rainfall for the fertility of their crops, the gods could be generous and bring rain; but if the gods were angry they could send hail and destroy seedlings or cause drought, which brought famine and killed the pastures that nurtured llama and alpaca herds.

They believed that offerings to the mountains appeased the gods. And because rainfall was so vital to the lives of Andean people the gods were lavished with valuable gifts: llamas, human figurines of precious metal and shell swathed in miniature garments, coca leaves, and occasionally, the most precious offering of all—human life.

As shocking and cruel as human sacrifice, especially that of young children, seems to us, some Andean people believed that when people died they joined their ancestors, who watched over people and villages from their lofty mountaintop sanctuaries.

Bernabe Cobo, a seventeenth-century Jesuit chronicler, noted that those chosen to be sacrificed considered it a great honor, believing they "would be favored by having their souls rest in great peace."

We know little of how those who came before the Incas worshipped mountains. But from the chroniclers—the soldiers, priests and officials who accompanied the Spanish conquistadors—we know that the Inca sacrifice ceremony was part of an elaborate ritual known as the *capac bucha*, or royal obligation.

The Inca rulers had obligations to their subjects and, in turn, the citizens of Tawantinsuyu, as the Inca called their sprawling empire, had responsibilities to fulfill. First and foremost among the obligations of the citizens was to provide the Incas with a labor force. This was founded on commonly shared Andean views of communal work and based on a sense of reciprocity that carefully balanced rights and obligations. The Andean gods were also part of this give and take and had to be pampered and proffered (sic) offerings to ensure rainfall and prevent natural disasters such as earthquakes or landslides.

Every year young boys and girls from all over the realm came to Cuzco, the capital. The Incas, noted Cobo, collected the children "by way of tribute throughout the kingdom...the males were children of about ten years of age or younger, and some females...were the same age as the boys, others were maidens fifteen or sixteen years of age...They could not have any blemish or even a mole on their entire body."

Human sacrifice took place at the beginning and end of the agricultural cycle, especially at the onset of the rainy season, or when an Inca emperor fell ill or died, or "for things of great importance such as times of pestilence, famine, war, or other great disasters...[or] such as when the Inca took the crown and sceptre of the kingdom," wrote Cobo.

And unlike many of the accounts in the chronicles, in this ritual the chroniclers' descriptions are borne out by archaeology.

Unwrapping Juanita

Sonia Guillen, a Peruvian bioarchaeologist who is painstakingly unwrapping Juanita, believes her organs and tissues are intact and haven't decomposed—a first in Andean archaeology. But getting to the body is a daunting undertaking. Ice had adhered Juanita's clothing to her body, especially to areas where there is little tissue, like the neck.

It took several days of carefully wielding a soldering iron to vaporize the ice—without scorching the fabric—just to untie the frozen knot below Juanita's chin that held the outer garment, a striped cloak fastened by a wide belt.

Beneath, Guillen says, Juanita is wearing an *acsu*—a long tunic with openings for the neck and arms—cinched by a belt.

The *llicla*, or shawl, covering her shoulders is held by three *tupus*, shawl pins, possibly bronze—the pins haven't been analyzed yet. Both Juanita's cloak and belt are woven in a local style of the Arequipa region, while her tunic and shawl appear to be from Cuzco.

Once Guillen and her team have removed the clothing and shawl pins, a CAT scan will determine how intact Juanita's organs are. Rather than an autopsy Guillen will carry out what she calls a "conservative dissection" to retrieve lung and liver tissue as well as muscle tissue to run DNA tests. And Juanita's stomach contents will reveal her last meal.

Guillen notes that her "peaceful expression" indicates Juanita didn't die violently but probably died of exposure. Cobo wrote that some of the children were given chicha and lapsed into a drunken stupor, never to wake up. Others were "strangled with a cord or [had] their throats slit."

"You don't offer a dead girl to a mountain god," Guillen says. "She was alive when she reached the summit."