Nasca skeleton holds

by Ann Friou
The ancient Nasca people of Peru, who occupied Peru’s southern coast from A.D. 1 to A.D. 750, are known for producing the “Nasca lines” in the earth — giant figures that can be discerned only from high above them. They are also known for creating trophy heads — human heads modified by mummification or other preparation. Little is known about the trophy heads’ origin and purpose. Anthropologists continue to debate whether the heads were more likely to have been severed from enemies during battle or in the practice of ritual decapitation to ensure agricultural fertility.

Until Christina Conlee’s spectacular discovery in 2004 of a headless skeleton in a Nasca tomb, scientists had little convincing evidence for ritual decapitation among the Nasca. Although images of disembodied heads are common in Nasca art, looters of archaeological sites have destroyed much of the society’s physical record of death and burial practices. In the Nasca region, only eight headless bodies have been recovered with evidence of decapitation. Conlee’s finding is the only one to be recovered from the middle Nasca period, A.D. 450-550.

Conlee, assistant professor of anthropology, found the headless skeleton while excavating a site called La Tiza during a project funded by grants from the National Science Foundation and the Texas State Research Enhancement Program. Her findings were published in the June 2007 issue of *Current Anthropology*. The skeleton appears to have belonged to a 20- to 25-year-old man. The skeleton’s third vertebra shows evidence of having been cut at or very soon after the time of death, indicating decapitation, probably with a sharp obsidian knife.

Conlee found the skeleton sitting cross-legged with a ceramic “head jar” placed next to the body — a jar painted with two inverted human faces and branches encircling the vessel. Other head jars have been found at Nasca homesteads, and they’ve been found buried with skeletons whose heads are still

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intact. But Conlee’s finding is extremely rare: Only two other decapitated Nasca skeletons have been found buried with head jars, and both were from much earlier time periods.

Little is known about the function of head jars, Conlee said. However, the reversible image of a human face on the La Tiza jar suggests that it might have been meant as a substitute for the victim’s missing head. The Nasca may have believed that a person needed to have a head when he entered the afterlife, she said, adding that the plant images on the jar suggest a link to agricultural fertility, as well as to human fertility.

Conlee’s discovery at La Tiza fuels the ongoing debate over the Nasca trophy heads: Were they produced in ritual sacrifice or were they taken as trophies in battle?

Because of the age and condition of the body at La Tiza and the presence of the jar, Conlee theorizes that the victim was killed to appease Nasca ancestors and to ensure agricultural fertility and the continuation of the society. The shedding of blood was considered necessary to nourish the earth to produce a good harvest, she said.

Conlee also points to damage on the jar that indicates it had been used prior to being included in the tomb. Head jars are rarely found with skeletons; most are found at domestic sites, and prior research has concluded that they were probably used to drink from, most likely in connection with fertility rituals.

“If the head jar was used during fertility rituals, then its inclusion in the burial further strengthens the relationship between decapitation and rebirth,” Conlee said.

Two destabilizing events in the middle Nasca period, A.D. 450–550, may have made the Nasca feel a particular need to perform a sacrifice in service to the gods, Conlee continued.

“There is an indication that the region experienced a dry period — potentially a drought — during which the Nasca may not have had as much water as they were used to, and this could have caused them to feel insecure about the region’s fertility,” she said.
“The region also appears to have experienced an increase in warfare during this time, perhaps as a result of a drought. We have evidence of a ceremonial center being abandoned, of increases in the area’s population, of changes in pottery styles — all indicators of change and instability within the society.”

Since the publication of her findings last summer, Conlee’s colleague, physical anthropologist Michele Buzon of Purdue, has done a chemical analysis of the La Tiza skeleton, comparing the elemental composition of the bone to that occurring locally in the La Tiza soil. From the analysis, Conlee concludes that the decapitated individual was from the La Tiza area, further validating the idea that he was decapitated in ritual sacrifice rather than in battle.

Conlee and Buzon have spent the past year analyzing additional burials from La Tiza that occurred over a 1,000-year span — including another headless man. This man may not have been decapitated, Conlee explained, because his vertebrae don’t show the telltale marks of decapitation. No head jar was found with him. Conlee and Buzon hope to learn more about the individual through further research and to publish their new findings in the coming year.