

New World's first gunshot victim identified

by UPI

Archaeologists have uncovered the skeleton of the first documented gunshot victim in the New World in an Inca cemetery outside Lima, Peru. The body is thought to be the first forensic ally proven casualty of the Spanish conquest, one of 72 apparent victims of an uprising against the conquistadors.

The find, from a team led by Peruvian archaeologist and National Geographic grantee Guillermo Cock, was announced June 20 by the National Geographic Society.

Courtesy National Geographic

Cock, who has worked more than 20 years to understand these Inca gravesites, had dug a test trench in a hillside in the suburb of Puruchuco at the request of the Lima city government, which planned a road there. In the trench, Cock and archaeologist colleague Elena Goycochea struck a set of graves and concluded that the spot had been a cemetery. Since they began digging in 2004, the team has excavated about 500 skeletons dating back some 500 years to the Inca civilization. Called the "Romans of the New World," the Inca conquered the entire Andean region until their reign ended in 1532 with the Spanish invasion. Cock found that 72 of the bodies on the hillside had been buried without the usual Inca reverence for death, such as being ritually wrapped, placed in a crouched position and facing east. "These bodies were strangely buried," Cock said. "They were not facing the right direction, they were tied up or hastily wrapped in a simple cloth, they had no offerings and they were buried at a shallow depth. Some of the bodies also showed signs of terrible violence. They had been hacked, torn, impaled" in injuries that looked as if they had been caused by iron weapons "and several had injuries on their heads and faces that looked as if they were caused by gunshots." One of the skulls bore an entrance and exit wound, and nearby a plug of bone that might have been blasted out of the skull was found. At first, Cock thought the holes in the skull were modern "results" from vandals. But the plug of bone, recovered intact, reflected an impact much less forceful than any modern gunshot and carried a distinct concave imprint highly suggestive of a musket ball, they said. Further tests, including scanning for traces of metal, confirmed the hunch, they added. Edges of the holes in the skull and the entrance bone plug were found to be impregnated with fragments of iron, a metal sometimes used for Spanish musket balls. It appears that a musket ball less than an inch in diameter had punched into the back of the skull and passed through the head, leaving pieces of iron deep inside the bone that stayed there for 500 years. The guns used to inflict these injuries would have been some of the world's first firearms "16th-century European's most advanced military technology, according to military historian John Guilmartin of West Point Military Academy. "The Spaniards knew how to use them," he said. Cock and his team believe the killings took place in the summer of 1536 during an Inca uprising against the Spanish occupiers led by Francisco Pizarro, known as the siege of Lima. Among the 72 hastily buried bodies were several women and adolescents. Cock said these would not have been soldiers but attendants and supporters of the warriors, who cooked, carried supplies and took care of the injured. The bodies were hastily buried most likely because the Inca, in the midst of the uprising, had no time or resources to bury their dead in the appropriate traditional manner.

Courtesy Cell Press and World Science staff

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