

Cannibalism Confirmed Among Ancient Mexican Group

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Eating humans "crucial" to spiritual life of the Xiximes people.



Workers excavate houses at Cueva del Maguey in Mexico, a site that revealed cannibalized bones.

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/news/2011/11/110930-cannibalism-cannibals-mexico-xiximes-human-bones-science/> Sabrina Valle

It's long been rumored that an ancient, isolated people in what's now northern Mexico ate their own kind, in the hopes that they'd be able to eat corn later.

Now an analysis of more than three dozen bones bearing evidence of boiling and defleshing confirms that the Xiximes people were in fact cannibals, archaeologists say.

The Xiximes believed that ingesting the bodies and souls of their enemies and using the cleaned bones in rituals would guarantee the fertility of the grain harvest, according to historical accounts by Jesuit missionaries.

The newfound bones prove that cannibalism, "was a crucial aspect of their worldview, their identity," said José Luis Punzo, an archaeologist behind the new research.



Two engraved arrows and a human rib found at Cueva del Maguey. Photograph courtesy José Luis Punzo, INAH.

Eating Only Their Own

The mountains of what's now Durango state (map) were once home to some 5,000 Xiximes, as well as other indigenous groups.

It was only the Xiximes and the like-minded Acaxées who are said to have been cannibals, though no archaeological evidence for the practice has been found for the Acaxées, said Punzo, of the Durango office of the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH).

"Through their rituals, cannibalism, and bone hoarding, they marked a clear boundary between an 'us' and 'them,'" Punzo said—"us" being the Acaxées and Xiximes, and "them" being everybody else.

The two groups fought and killed members of other groups, he said. But the Acaxées and Xiximes ate only their own kind, specifically men. Other native groups and Spanish colonizers were apparently ritually worthless, according to historical studies.

Cave Cache of Boiled Bones

Some historians had derided the missionaries' reports of cannibalism as exaggerations. But the bones found in Cueva del Maguey—a hamlet built inside a huge, cliffside cave—should erase any doubts, Punzo said.

(Related: "Neandertals Turned to Cannibalism, Bone Cave Suggests.")

Tests showed that 80 percent of four dozen bones—found in houses dated to

around 1425—bear marks and other evidence of being boiled and cut with blades of stone, Punzo added.

The bones had been relatively untouched for centuries—a godsend for scientists made possible by the isolation of Cueva del Maguey, deep in a pine forest and 8,530 feet (2,600 meters) above sea level.

Circle of Life

For the Xiximes, the planting-and-sowing cycle was intertwined with a cycle of cannibalism and bone rituals, according to the INAH report, announced at the 14th Archaeology Conference of the North Frontier this summer in Paquimé, Mexico.

After each corn harvest, Xiximes warriors were deployed to hunt for enemies—and their flesh.

Most of the time the Xiximes would prey on lone men from other villages working in the fields. Other times, the Xiximes would engage small groups in forest battles, according to the historical record.

The warriors would bring the dead victims back to the village, where Xiximes would rip the bodies apart at the joints, taking care not to break the bones. In cases when carrying a whole body was impractical, the head and hands would be removed and brought back to the village, according to INAH's research.

Body parts were cooked in pans until the bones emerged clean. The flesh was then cooked with beans and corn and eaten in a type of soup—part of an all-night village ritual, complete with singing and dancing, according to missionaries' reports.

After the feast, the bones were stored for months in treasure houses. Then, in the run-up to the annual planting season, the Xiximes would hang the bones from roofs and trees—enticements to the spirits to help the crops along.

"For these practices," Punzo said, "they were called by Jesuits the wildest and most barbarian people of the New World."

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