



Shaft Tombs

Discovered in Bolaños, Jalisco

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A singular burial custom called “shaft tombs” was practiced in pre-Hispanic Mexico. Geographically limited to the West, hundreds have been found, but absolutely all of them had been violated by local inhabitants. Called “shaft tombs” because they have a vertical hole with one or two subterranean chambers dug out of firm soil, they were used to bury rulers, accompanied by their wives and servants.

The importance of the finds in the Bolaños area of Mexico’s state of Jalisco is that they are the first shaft tombs excavated intact by archeologists, in addi-



Above: Hollow figure of priest smoking.

Below: Hollow male figure with eyes sewn up, symbolizing a dead body.

tion to the fact that these kinds of tombs were unknown so far north, since the majority had been discovered on the coastal plain.

The Bolaños region is part of the Sierra Madre Occidental in northern Jalisco. It is divided by a canyon surrounded by high mountains, with the Bolaños River running through it. Environmental conditions today are harsh: a hot dry climate with thorny vegetation (prickly pears, mesquite and other cactuses). However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that in the past, the area had forests and much more varied vegetation.

The region was unknown to Mexican archeologists, the prevailing idea being that it had been uninhabited because of its rough terrain. The few historic docu-

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Photos by Carlos López Cruz.



Object decorated with a seated person with the God of the Sun in his right hand.

ments left by sixteenth-century Spanish colonists and clergy mention it as a temporary refuge of “Chichimecas,” a word meaning “nomadic tribes.”

However, in the middle of Bolaños Canyon, there is a small valley that was highly populated in pre-Hispanic times. The civilization that inhabited it had a well defined social hierarchy. At the top of a hill called El Piñón, they built a complex consisting of a temple, a ball game, a *temazcal* steam bath and the dwellings of the rulers and the elite. Around this complex were the houses of craftsmen, specialists in ceramics and stone artifacts (axes, tips for projectile weapons, scrapers and knives).

Three shaft tombs, between 1,500 and 1,800 years old, were found under one of the buildings of the ceremonial center. They formed a shallow cavity, with



Vessel used for food, with stand.

a step leading to a circular chamber. The discovery of this monument intact made it possible to study a previously unknown pre-Hispanic burial rite. The tombs had been reused several times; each one contained a ruler, his wives and a priest whose mission was to protect the ruler from evil spirits. This exalted personage also needed a dog by his side to guide him through the underworld to his final resting place.

The ruler was richly attired and laid out on a *petate*¹ on the chamber floor. His woven cotton clothing was a symbol of his exalted station, and he was adorned with arm bracelets and necklaces made of conch shells, sea snail shells and black coral. Around him were placed receptacles full of food so he would not be hungry during his journey to the underworld, and hollow, fired clay figurines representing members of society: pregnant women, warriors, servants and priests holding up funeral urns or smoking (tobacco was one of the hallucinogens used to communicate with the gods).

The ruler’s attendants were sacrificed and buried together with the objects they used in life: women with the tools used to spin cotton thread and the pigments for decorating pottery; priests with conch shell trumpets on their chests or a tube-shaped, fired clay pipe next to them, used during religious ceremonies; warriors with their arms, including spear throwers and heads for projectile weapons. All these sorts of pieces were found with the human remains that surrounded the skeleton of the main inhabitant of the tomb.

The findings represent only the last multiple burial, but we know that the tombs were reused because of the pile of bones and crania in the back of each chamber and the great urns full of burned bones found against the tomb walls. These receptacles held the remains of previous burials that had to be kept inside the chamber because it was a sacred place destined for death. Burning the bones was the space-saving solution these peoples found to be able to use the chambers again and again for new burials. Since no traces of cremation were found in other tombs

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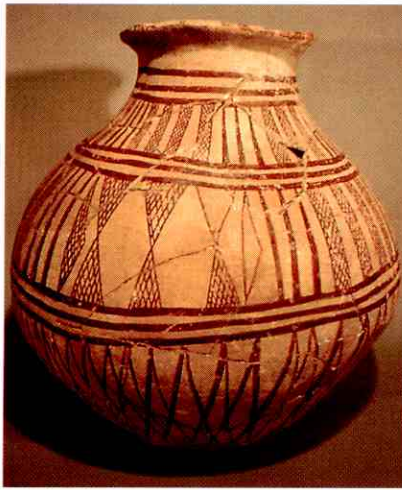


Stone hatchet with dog's head.

robbed in Mexico's West, this is considered a regional custom.

The discovery of a large number of children's and adolescents' bones in these chambers indicates that the tombs functioned as a type of family crypt. These bodies were buried immediately after death, between the burial of one ruler and another. The bones belonging to the previously buried bodies were all piled together in the rear of the chamber without regard to rank. Once the space was filled up, they were cremated, put into the large urns and placed back in the chamber. All indicators point to the tombs being used exclusively for rulers and their families.

Pottery vessels decorated with geometric forms, some filled with food, were made specially for the death rituals. The hollow figurines are nude but their bodies are covered with symbols linked to religion and funeral rites. Both the vessels and the figurines were decorated solely with black and red, the colors used in anything related to death.



Funeral urn decorated with red on a creme-colored background.

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The presence of conch shells, obsidian and minerals indicates trade with groups from areas as far away as Casas Grandes in what is now the state of Chi-

huahua; Chalchihuites in Zacatecas; Nayarit and Baja California; and the central and coastal regions of Jalisco. Even though the pottery has a very local style, some pieces show influence of the cultures from Nayarit.

Using the river for transportation, the Bolaños region established a trade route that linked Mexico's North and West. From the North, they obtained different minerals mined in the Chalchihuites, Zacatecas area; from the West, mainly obsidian, cotton, tobacco and marine products. The inhabitants of the Bolaños region controlled the route and had access to all the products that went through the area, many very sought after by the members of their society since they were not produced locally.

The discoveries in these tombs are a very important contribution to Mexican history since they show that the Bolaños area functioned as a trade and cultural liaison between two very important regions of Mexico, the North and the West; clearly these peoples traded beyond their own areas of influence, such as Casas Grandes and Alta Vista in the North or the large settlements in central Jalisco.

In conclusion, we should emphasize that the “Bolaños culture” not only shared the shaft tombs with other cultures, but also developed enormously both socially and culturally thanks to trade and contact with travelers from other regions who went through Bolaños Canyon, thus exerting a determinant influence on its neighboring cultures. ■■■

NOTE

¹ A *petate* is a rectangle woven of jute or some other fibrous material used to sleep on. [Editor's Note.]