

Three chambers discovered beneath Mexico's ancient city of Teotihuacan

By Scientific American, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.23.14

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This photo shows a sculpture unearthed at the Teotihuacan archaeological site in Mexico. Mexican archaeologists have concluded a yearslong exploration of a tunnel sealed nearly 2,000 years ago at the ancient city of Teotihuacan and found thousands of relics. Teotihuacan dominated central Mexico centuries before the rise of the Aztecs in the 14th century. Photo: AP Photo/Proyecto Tlalocan, INAH

Scientists with the Mexican government announced Wednesday that three new chambers had been discovered at the end of a tunnel beneath the ancient city of Teotihuacan. The tunnel was first discovered in 2003 under the popular tourist destination, which lies just outside Mexico City. It is among the most important finds in the lost city's history.

Mexican archaeologists say that the new rooms contained thousands of objects, including carved statues, rubber balls, jade from Guatemala and a wooden box of shells. Beyond some traces of skin, however, no bodies have been discovered. Nonetheless, archaeologists suspect that there is a burial chamber somewhere in the tunnel.

"Just before the chambers is where we found very important offerings — a lot of them alongside many objects," says Sergio Gomez, who directs the excavation project. Such offerings would likely have been made to honor a deceased person or persons of great importance.

Latest Piece In A Puzzle

Archaeologists know very little about the mountain city of Teotihuacan. The tunnel, discovered 11 years ago under the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at the heart of the ancient city, is the latest piece in a puzzle dating back to before Europeans arrived in the New World.

"These findings are very important, both for the quantity and the quality of materials being discovered," commented Professor George Cowgill, who directs a research center at Teotihuacan. It will probably take years of analysis to truly understand the significance of each object and why they were placed together, he added.

As a city, Teotihuacan began around 150 B.C. and collapsed sometime in the seventh century A.D. During that time, it was probably the most powerful city in all of North America, dominating even the Classic Maya, who flourished in the lowlands during the same time period. The Maya were located far to the east in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala.

The inhabitants of Teotihuacan, unlike the Maya, did not have a system of writing and thus we know very little about how they lived or ran their city. For instance, archaeologists debate their political structure: One side envisions a single all-powerful ruler whereas the other believes there was a system of joint rule involving four rival groups.

Unfortunately, neither images of Teotihuacan's kings nor royal burials have yet been discovered, although scientists have found numerous high-ranking nobles. The discovery of a royal burial under the Temple of the Feathered Serpent might upend everything known about the city.

Many Mysteries Remain

The tunnel itself was first discovered when a heavy rainstorm exposed a shaft that led to a spot about halfway down the tunnel's length. The shaft's function remains a mystery, though it could have been used for astronomical purposes. Scientists believe the tunnel was used in ceremonies.

Over the next decade, Gomez's team dug out the tunnel and found numerous offerings. A high point came in 2013 with the discovery of two chambers on either side of the tunnel, which were filled with metal mirrors and strange crystal spheres. Beyond the point where those chambers are located the tunnel dropped below the water table — that is, the soil at that end of the tunnel is full of water.

"The water has made our work move slower," Gomez says. However, "the large quantity of water below has enabled the preservation of materials like wood, rubber and even skin fragments."

He and his team announced Wednesday that three more chambers lay beyond the initial two, arranged in a sort of cross just a few dozen feet down the tunnel. In and around those chambers he found more puzzling objects, including a wooden box filled with shells imported from the ocean and carved by stone tools.

"That Lies Beneath"

In addition, there were four 23.6-inch-tall (60 centimeters) jade statues, rubber balls and jaguar remains. They also report finding fragments of skin, although they can't be sure yet if the skin is human. Human or not, there are no obvious burials in any of the chambers — but that does not mean that the quest for a Teotihuacan burial is over.

The newly discovered objects could be "funerary offerings," but given the "large number of rather plain jars" they could also be the "remains of a huge feast," Cowgill observed. The feast could have been "part of a great funerary and sacrificial ceremony." Cowgill added that other objects in the chambers support the idea that women were important in Teotihuacan society and show that trade was carried out with distant peoples.

Gomez's team is excavating the rooms down to the floors. He said it is possible there are buried nobles hidden under debris or even below the chamber floors. He expects the work to continue and remains optimistic that a body will be found.

"It's very exciting because it" supports the theory "that this could be an offering for something more important that lies beneath," Gomez said. He believes that "there is a burial site but we won't know for sure until next year."

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "That Lies Beneath" where scientists speculate on the meaning of some of the findings.

- 2 Which sentence describes something that is good for the preservation of old materials but represents a major challenge for the archaeologists working on the excavation project.
 - (A) The shaft's function remains a mystery, though it could have been used for astronomical purposes.
 - (B) The inhabitants of Teotihuacan, unlike the Maya, did not have a system of writing and thus we know very little about how they lived or ran their city.
 - (C) Beyond the point where those chambers are located the tunnel dropped below the water table — that is, the soil at that end of the tunnel is full of water.
 - (D) The tunnel itself was first discovered when a heavy rainstorm exposed a shaft that led to a spot about halfway down the tunnel's length.

- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

The tunnel, discovered 11 years ago under the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at the heart of the ancient city, is the latest piece in a puzzle dating back to before Europeans arrived in the New World.

Select the sentence from the article that most likely describes an aspect of the "puzzle" in the sentence above.

- (A) One side envisions a single all-powerful ruler whereas the other believes there was a system of joint rule involving four rival groups.
- (B) In and around those chambers he found more puzzling objects, including a wooden box filled with shells imported from the ocean and carved by stone tools.
- (C) He said it is possible there are buried nobles hidden under debris or even below the chamber floors.
- (D) Mexican archaeologists say that the new rooms contained thousands of objects, including carved statues, rubber balls, jade from Guatemala and a wooden box of shells.

4 Read the sentence from the article.

The discovery of a royal burial under the Temple of the Feathered Serpent might upend everything known about the city.

Which word BEST describes the use of "upend" in the sentence above?

- (A) technical
- (B) figurative
- (C) ferocious
- (D) literal

Answer Key

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Paragraph 13:

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