

Ancient city dated as oldest in Americas

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A team of American and Peruvian anthropologists has announced that the city of Caral, 120 miles north of the Peruvian capital of Lima, is the oldest city in the Americas. A radiocarbon analysis has determined that the city was built around 2,600 BC and flourished for 500 years after that. This would make Caral contemporaneous with the building of the Pyramids in Egypt. The new dating makes Caral at least 1,000 years older than any similar settlement in the Americas.

Caral, discovered in 1905, is a huge 170-acre complex on a plateau in the remote Supe Valley, near another 18 ancient settlements. It is surrounded by six stepped pyramids, the largest of which is 65 feet tall and 450-500 feet at its base. Nearby were high-status buildings made of stone with plastered walls and more humble structures on the outskirts of the city.

Cotton and squash appear to have been the major crops, grown with the assistance of a sophisticated irrigation system. Also discovered were remains of peppers, beans, avocados and potatoes. Archaeologists have theorized that the inhabitants of Caral may have traded cotton, used for making fishing nets, to coastal peoples in return for maritime produce, since remains of anchovies, clams and sardines have been unearthed in the area. The people of Caral do not seem to have used ceramics—fired clay pots and containers—nor to have cultivated maize, the staple crop of most ancient American civilizations.

In a press release issued by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, one of the excavators, Jonathan Haas, said of Caral: “The location offers an opportunity to investigate one of the fundamental questions of Western archaeology and social science, namely, what is the origin of complex, centralized, highly organized society in the Americas?”

The Caral culture could mobilize enormous amounts of manpower to construct the massive structures of the city and to irrigate large areas of farmland. This could

only have been done by a society divided into classes. A class is a social group that plays a distinct role in the productive process, primarily agriculture in early cultures. A ruling group (e.g., aristocrats, priests, a god-king) expropriated the surplus labor of a subordinate group by purchase, or, most likely in the case of Caral, by force.

Class societies existed in the Americas for thousands of years before European contact. The Spanish conquistadors encountered the highly evolved Inca Empire when they invaded Peru at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Incas had a ruling class of nobles and priests, an absolute monarch, and a population of small farmers that were required to work on the lands of the upper classes.

Traditionally, archaeologists have thought that large-scale city culture developed after the invention of pottery and grain-cultivation. Pottery was supposed to have been an indispensable tool for storage and cooking; grain can be easily preserved and transported to feed large numbers of people. The absence of these two technologies in Caral underscores the fact that it is not simply the presence of particular skill that is decisive for the development of a complex urban society, but rather the evolution of a sophisticated division of labor.

The dating of Caral reveals that class society arose in the ancient Americas simultaneously with early class societies of Asia and Africa, such as Egypt and Sumeria (in modern Iraq). Caral's monumental architecture, its irrigation system, and its regional trade all indicate that the early class societies of the Americas may have developed in much the same manner as those in the old world. This suggests that the class societies of the Western and Eastern hemispheres independently emerged from previous, more egalitarian tribal societies according to the same basic laws.

Images of the site can be downloaded at the Field

Museum's web site:

http://www.fmnh.org/museum_info/press/press_hass.htm



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