

Maya 'War Crimes Scene' Uncovered
Archeologists say bones and other items indicate a massacre that was key to the civilization's fall.

By Thomas H. Maugh II, Times Staff Writer

Archeologists excavating the ruined Guatemalan city of Cancuen have stumbled across the remains of what they believe is one of the pivotal events in the collapse of the Maya civilization — the desperate defense of the once-great trading center and the ritual execution of at least 45 members of its royal court.

An enemy as yet unknown not only wiped out the royal dynasty about AD 800, but systematically eliminated religious and cultural artifacts — in effect, killing the city and leaving it abandoned to the elements, according to new research announced Wednesday.

The archeological team found dozens of remarkably preserved skeletons piled in mass graves, as well as other artifacts, indicating what the lead researcher described as "a war crimes scene."

After the siege of Cancuen, cities in the western Maya lowlands in what is now Guatemala were abandoned, most within 20 to 30 years, the researchers said. The displaced populations moved to the east and north, where they eventually depleted local resources and faded away.

"This was a critical historical moment, like the assassination of [Austrian] Archduke [Franz] Ferdinand [which triggered] World War I," said archeologist Arthur A. Demarest of Vanderbilt University, whose team discovered the charnel house this summer. "It set off the domino of Classic Maya collapse."

Added archeologist David Freidel of Southern Methodist University, "This is an effort not to try to subordinate the royal court to an overlord, but to absolutely wipe it out. It's a remarkable and very poignant example of the kind of violence that marks the collapse of the Maya civilization."

It might have been a nobles' revolt, a peasants' revolt or an outside attack, said Freidel, who was not involved in the discovery. "We just don't know."

But the city's occupants clearly were aware of the impending disaster. Demarest and his team found a system of hastily constructed and unfinished stone and wooden palisades that they say showed a desperate attempt to defend Cancuen.

Spearheads scattered throughout the city, abandoned construction sites and skeletons with markings of spear and ax wounds bear witness to the intensity of the battle and the finality of the defeat.

"Clearly, these defenses failed," Demarest said.

The Maya dominated Central America for more than 1,500 years, from well before the birth of Christ to late in the first millennium. They established a complex network of kingdoms dominated by "holy lords," building large cities with palaces and pyramids in the region, reaching their peak from AD 300 to 900.

Then, they disappeared.

The mysterious nature of that collapse has captivated at least two generations of scholars, provoking theories including environmental despoliation, drought and vicious warfare. Even the time frame is the subject of debate, with some arguing for a sudden collapse within a few years and others for a prolonged disintegration over 2 1/2 centuries.

The new discovery "supports Demarest's view that the Classic Maya civilization collapsed by endemic warfare," said archeologist Heather McKillop of Louisiana State University.

"The massacre is one of those rare events in archeology where an event is frozen in time," she added.

The site of Cancuen, at the headwaters of the Pasion River, has been known for more than a century, but it was generally regarded as an insignificant outpost until five years ago, when Demarest's team discovered a 170-room, three-story palace sprawling over an area the size of six football fields.

The palace was surrounded by workshops for jade, obsidian, pyrite and other precious goods.

Excavations in the last five years showed it was an unusually wealthy city because of its ability to supply other cities throughout the empire with trade goods used by the upper classes to signify authority — necessary for maintaining their position.

The city's kings maintained their position over four centuries through treaties, intermarriages and diplomatic missions without engaging in warfare. "They were not the greatest or most powerful dynasty, but they were the cleverest," Demarest said.

The dynasty reached its peak during the 50-year reign of Taj Chan Ahk. His son, Kan Maax, reigned for only about five years before the attack that ended the city's existence.

Demarest's team was finishing its dig for the summer when Guatemalan archeologists Sylvia Alvarado and Tomas Barrientos, tracing a system of water channels through the city, stumbled on a 90-square-yard cistern, filled with mud, directly in front of the palace.

When they began digging in it, Demarest said, they found "bones, bones, bones and more bones ... more bones than I have ever seen."

Bones tend to degrade quickly in the jungle, but the mud helped preserve these.

"This is the strangest ... find I have ever made," he said.

With his team's season nearly finished and the rainy season approaching, Demarest called on the Forensic Anthropological Foundation of Guatemala for assistance. Formed in 1996 after the signing of the Guatemalan Peace Accords, the foundation excavated the mass graves of thousands of Guatemalan villagers killed in civil war. It has also been sent to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Rwanda and Afghanistan to investigate other massacres for war crimes trials.

"This was a war crimes scene," said Demarest, whose excavation was funded by the National Geographic Society and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Under the direction of Guatemalan archeologists Fredy Peccerelli and Jose Suasnevar — both former students of Demarest — the team found the remains of 31 people in the cistern. The bodies were those of men, women and children, including two pregnant women.

Subsequent excavations revealed the bodies of Kan Maax and his queen in a nearby shallow grave and a dozen other nobles in a grave north of the palace. Their identities were established by their jewelry, headdresses and other artifacts.

Some of the nobles may have been wounded or killed in the defense of the city, but most were executed by spear thrusts to the throat, "a quick way to kill someone," Demarest said.

After they were dead, the bodies were ritually dismembered and thrown into the cistern or graves along with the clothes they were wearing, ceremonial headdresses, jewelry and other artifacts.

"These were incredibly precious things" like jades, jaguar-fang necklaces and Pacific Coast shells, Demarest said.

The invaders also went through the city and chipped the faces off monuments, ritually "killing" them, he added. "They were not only terminating the dynasty, they were terminating the entire site."