



Photo by Robert W. Rizzo

Sleepyheads

Danielle Sampey, left, and her sister Dawn put their heads together for a nap between classes Wednesday morning. The sisters live together and were up most of the night looking for their lost dog. They

eventually found the dog, but lost a lot of sleep in the process. Danielle is 21 years old and a biomedical science major while Dawn, 19 is studying elementary education. The women are from Bellville.

Human skulls discovered in pit offer look at Meso-Americans

A&M researcher says bones may explain sacrifice rituals

By Anne Neidinger
Reporter

Thirty human skulls discovered in a pit at a Mayan Indian site by Texas A&M anthropologists in 1980 show signs of decapitation and skinning, which suggests religious sacrifice or political conflict within the Mayan society, says Virginia Massey, an A&M doctoral candidate in anthropology.

The small, shallow pit at the site of Colha in Belize, which is in Central America, contained skulls of 20 adult males and females and 10 children, Massey says.

Massey, whose master's thesis was about the Colha skulls, conducted the skull research in collaboration with Dr. D. Gentry Steele, an A&M anthropology professor.

The Maya project at Colha was sponsored by A&M, the Center for Archaeological Research at the University of Texas in San Antonio and the Centro Studi e Ricerche Ligabue in Venice, Italy.

Dr. Harry Shafer, an A&M anthropology professor, was co-director of project.

Massey says the skulls, which are dated A.D. 850, were found surrounded by pieces of ceramics in a pit next to a monument-like structure.

Other skeleton remains were not found, Massey says.

Anthropologists believe the skulls are Meso-American, probably Mayan, since some of them have the cranial deformations and filed teeth characteristic of ancient Meso-Americans, Massey says.

A detailed historic account of the Mayans was compiled by Bishop

Landa, who wrote extensively about them during his travels through the Yucatan Peninsula in the 16th century, Massey says.

The Mayans, according to Landa's writings, often changed the shape of their babies' skulls by putting boards on the front and back of the infants' heads and binding them tightly until the desired shape was formed.

This practice is evident in the skulls from Colha, Massey says.

Two other known Meso-American skull pits were discovered at the Cerro de las Mesas camp in southern Veracruz, Mexico and at Rio Hondo,

the same time," Massey says. "This is no secondary burial."

If the people at Colha were involved in a secondary burial, she said, lower jaws and some neck vertebrae would not have been found with the skulls.

This is because the soft tissue surrounding them would have decomposed during the time of primary burial and fallen away, she says.

"That's not what we have here," Massey says.

The bodies must have been decapitated at or shortly after the time of death, she says, because the soft tissue

"It's always interesting to find out how other people lived. And one thing that's different from one culture to the other is how they bury the dead."

— Virginia Massey, A&M graduate student

Mexico. The 52 skulls at the Veracruz site were each found in a pottery vessel.

"Both of these pits could be 'secondary burials,'" Massey says.

Many cultures practiced secondary burials by burying the entire body, and exhuming it later, she says.

Individuals in these two skull pits could have died naturally, been buried, and later disinterred. Their heads might have been saved, possibly as a way of honoring the dead, she says.

Many generations might have been exhumed at one time and reburied at a special ceremony, she says.

"That's what makes the skull pit at Colha so unique, because we know these individuals were all killed at

sue surrounding the vertebrae and jaw did not decompose before burial.

"There are several things that indicate the incident may have had some ritual significance, but there are equally important things that indicate it may have been political," Massey says.

The pit does not look like a deliberate burial site, which might be evidence of political conflict, Massey says. It seems that the monument next to the pit fell onto the grave.

Massey says archaeologists discovered that after the time the building fell, the Colha population decreased sharply and the production of artifacts and monumental structures ceased.

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