

THE MYSTERIOUS PAST OF LATIN AMERICA

Archaeological research being done by Polish scientists in South America is helping to reveal its pre-Columbian history.



Bird's eye view of the Castillo de Huarney site

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Gold and silver ear ornaments discovered in the Castillo de Huarney chamber

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Polish archaeologists have been present in the Americas for many years. The earliest excavation efforts, though primitive compared to modern techniques, were carried out in the 1870s in Ancón near Lima by Władysław Kluger, a Polish engineer who also contributed to the construction of transportation infrastructure in Peru and briefly served as the rector of the local polytechnic. A century later, in the 1970s, the first Polish research expedition to the Andes was launched, led by two Kraków archaeologists, Andrzej Żaki and Andrzej Krzanowski.

At the University of Warsaw, interest in American archaeology was sparked by the anthropological studies in Mexico carried out by Andrzej Wierciński. Over the years, this led to productive collaborations with Italian and German missions, primarily in the southern areas of Peru, including Nazca and Arequipa. Currently, the Department of Archaeology of the Americas, founded in 2021 at the University of Warsaw, brings together scholars who are focused on Latin America.

The department's personnel carry out archaeological excavations at three primary sites: Castillo de Huarney on the northern coast of Peru, Toro Muerto on the southern coast, and San Isidro in El Salvador. Local archaeologists are actively involved in all three projects.

Remarkable finds from the Wari Culture

The Castillo de Huarney archaeological site is located on the outskirts of the modern town of Huarney, approximately 300 km north of Lima, the capital of Peru. Covering nearly 50 hectares, the remnants of pre-Columbian architectural structures are prominently visible on its surface. Archaeological research

at this site was begun in 2010 by a team of scientists from Peru and Poland.

Although under study for over a decade now, the site continues to yield surprises. The most significant discovery, which has revolutionized the field of pre-Columbian Peruvian archaeology, is the unearthing of the first undisturbed tomb linked to the pre-Incan Wari empire, dating back to the 9th century CE. The narrative of this discovery is captivating. In 2012, archaeologists decided to document the remnants of the largest burial tower (*chullpa*) on the site, previously assumed to have been thoroughly looted. During the cleaning of the central chamber, they uncovered an almost intact floor composed of large, trapezoidal mud bricks atop a layer of crushed rock. Driven by curiosity about what lay beneath, the excavation team intensified their efforts. Eventually, amid the crushed rock debris and over a meter below the surface, the chitinous remains of fly cocoons were found, heralding a burial chamber underneath. Subsequent months of research led to the discovery of the remains of 58 women. One of these women, in light of the context of the find, was named the “Queen of Wari” by the media.



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Discovery of a ceramic figurine during the San Isidro excavations



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Above: the Toro Muerto site – in the foreground, petroglyphs depicting dancers

Right: the head of excavations in El Salvador, Jan Szymański, hard at work uncovering the past

Right: Archaeology students (Anna Bucholc and Paweł Rongies) engaged in excavation work

The lavish contents of the queen’s tomb, featuring over 1300 items made of gold, silver, copper, wood, bone, ceramic, and stone, suggest that all the women interred at Castillo de Huarmey were from the aristocracy, the elite of the first Andean empire, which flourished from the 7th to the 10th century CE. Notably, ear ornaments, or *orejeras*, crafted from bone, wood, gold, and silver were found and are considered a symbol of high social status. Historical records from the Spanish conquest era indicate that during the Inca period, such ornaments were exclusively worn by men; however, in the Wari empire, these intricately made items were also worn by women.

In 2022, researchers uncovered more still undisturbed burials. These were the graves of artisans who served the local elites. In this section of the site, now called the Gallery of Elite Craftsmen, tools (axes, knives, a saw) and semifinished products for crafting beautifully decorated baskets, similar to those previously found in an aristocratic tomb, were discovered. One of the graves was likely that of a metallurgist, responsible for creating or decorating *orejeras*, as another exquisite ear ornament of this type was found inside.

Rock art in the desert

At first glance, the Toro Muerto site resembles the surface of the Moon or Mars. This part of the desert is dotted with thousands of massive rock blocks, on which local inhabitants inscribed petroglyphs depicting geometric figures, animals, and humans, likely from the first centuries CE until Incan times (i.e., the early decades of the 16th century). This expansive

complex, located in the Majes River valley in southern Peru, covers an area of over 10 km². Since inventory-taking efforts began in 2015, nearly 2,600 rocks adorned with drawings have been catalogued, establishing it as the largest site of rock art in South America and one of the largest globally.

On some blocks, the engravings stand alone, while others display complex assemblies of images, possibly narrating stories or myths. It is clear that Toro Muerto served as a ceremonial site. It was not continuously inhabited; instead, people visited only during specific times of the year to etch new images and engage in rituals. Additionally, for nearly one and a half thousand years, there were nearby cemeteries in use. In recent times, many of these have been unfortunately plundered, and the petroglyphs themselves have also suffered damage. Over the last few centuries, the site has been used by the local population as a quarry, with rock blocks – including decorated ones – being cut up into smaller pieces for use as inexpensive building materials.

Since 2017, a Polish-Peruvian team of scientists has been conducting research at Toro Muerto. Given the site’s vast size, the team’s efforts are primarily focused on cataloging and documenting the rock engravings,



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Documenting rock carvings
– with project leader
Janusz Wołoszyn
in the foreground

trying to determine the sequence of their creation, and deciphering the site’s internal structure. One of the team’s most intriguing findings has involved discovering links between certain clusters of petroglyphs and specific sectors of the site with historical astronomical observations.

Excavation research that began in 2018 near some of the elaborately decorated blocks suggests that these were locations where various rituals took place. Besides engraving diverse motifs on the rock surfaces, people also gathered there for feasts and left votive offerings of plants, animals, and small painted stone slabs known as *lajas pintadas*.

Owing to its distinctive character, the site was added to the UNESCO Tentative List in 2019, positioning it as another candidate from Peru seeking inclusion in the prestigious UNESCO World Heritage List.

Connections to the Maya World

San Isidro, in turn, is a site in El Salvador covering at least 5 km², located at the base of the Santa Ana volcanic massif, west of the capital city, San Salvador. The site features remnants of numerous architectural structures, including dozens of monumental earthen platforms and pyramids. Research has been ongoing there since 2017. Even so, the San Isidro site also still holds many secrets.

Fragments of pottery and other artifacts suggest the site’s establishment dates back to the middle and late Preclassic periods (from 1000 BCE to 250 CE). The discovery of ceramic figurines with movable heads, jewelry made of green jadeite, and stone ves-

sels indicates strong connections to the Maya world. Currently, research is mainly focused on the largest and perhaps most significant area of the site, known as El Cerrito, which includes remnants of a massive pyramid-like structure and an adjacent concentration of smaller platforms. To reconstruct the full extent of the site, archaeologists employ non-invasive methods such as geophysical surveys with ground-penetrating radar and magnetometry. We have also recently developed a digital model of the entire area using drones to aid in further research.

The architecture and style of the artifacts found suggest that ancient San Isidro was a hub of vibrant trade and intellectual exchange with many areas of Mesoamerica to the west and the so-called Isthmo-Colombian area to the east. Radiocarbon dating indicates that the area’s peak development occurred around 400 CE.

Each site employs not only archaeologists but also specialists from various fields: digital archaeology, bioarchaeology, geology, archaeometry, archaeogenetics, and archaeozoology, among others. The results from these multidisciplinary research teams enable a precise reconstruction of the past, which is crucial in studying pre-Columbian cultures for which there are no historical records or written sources. The research team is international, including specialists from Polish universities, as well as universities in the United States, Peru, and El Salvador. Our ongoing research aims to illuminate the lives of the people who lived near Huarmey during Wari times, the creators of the petroglyphs in the Majes valley, and the residents at the southern borders of Maya influence, revealing their daily lives and cultural contexts. ■

Further reading:

Szymański J., Recent Research at San Isidro, El Salvador, in the Context of the Southeastern Mesoamerican Archaeology, *Estudios Latinoamericanos* 2020, vol. 40.

Wołoszyn J., Gonzales L., Rozwadowski A., The petroglyphs of Toro Muerto: new documentation and discoveries at the largest South American rock art complex, *Antiquity* 2019, vol. 9 (327).

<https://en.toromuerto.org>