

The Commonalities in the Archaeological Record: Child Sacrifice in the Americas

By: Aya Yagnaya
Student ID: 0596381

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Instructor: Dr. Helen Haines

Introduction

The beginning of anthropology was laced with ethnocentric concepts such as the civilized versus the savage and the following of godly teachings versus the wicked ways of witchcraft. People of different cultures were viewed as completely separate entities from one another; the proposal of people being fundamentally the same anywhere around the world was blasphemous. With the biased roots of anthropology, hard boundaries in the archaeological record are often in place, completely separating cultures, and peoples, from one another. I believe that formulating hard boundaries in the archaeological record is harmful to the interpretation and understanding of human culture, as a whole. No matter the time or place, people have the same capacities to formulate ideas akin to one another, develop similar technologies, and grow as societies.

To demonstrate how different cultures can exhibit similarities, in this essay I will present similarities between the Aztec, Inca, and Mayan empires, focusing on the use of ritualistic child sacrifice. The comparing and contrasting of child sacrifices between the Aztec, Inca, and Maya will provide insight as to how the human experience can share similarities across different cultures. I will begin with the Maya, followed by the Aztec, then the Inca. To explicate my argument the following will be discussed about each empire: the geographic locations and governing timeline relative to this paper, background information on religious and cultural beliefs, the purposes of ritualistic child sacrifice, and bioarchaeological evidence uncovered from specific sites associated with ritualistic sacrifice. Topics of discussion will be addressed in the empire-specific sections. Following the evidence presented from all three empires, I will discuss my findings by examining the differences and similarities. Finally, I will recap my findings and conclude how the significance of archaeological and cultural similarities impact the interpretation and understanding of humanity.

The Maya Empire

The Maya empire was located in modern-day Central America and Mexico (Figure 1). During the Postclassic period, human sacrifice became a traditional part of Maya religion and rituals (Arden 2011:134; Alanís 2008:190). Meanwhile, ritualistic child sacrifice came into focus during the beginning of the Terminal Classic period (AD 900-1100) through to the Postclassic period (AD 900-1450) (Arden 2011:134-135). Ritual child sacrifice was practised to please deities and maintain celestial balance. The Maya worshipped both the earth and the sky. Although they did not have a mountain range, they created their own with each erected pyramid (Toohey 2013:170) to represent the strong connection they had with celestial bodies.

Chac

A cenote was not only a source of water, the life-giving element, but a sacred location where the human world met the underworld (Arden 2011:140). The water deity Chac, who resided in the freshwater cenote, decided the crop yields by determining how much rain to allow to fall (Arden 2011:135, 140). The sacrificed children would humbly ask Chac for rain, or protection from violent storms (Arden 2011:140). Although sacrificing oneself for the greater good of the people was an honour, the ritual itself was purposely meant to bring sadness to the chosen children. In order to legitimize the sacrifices, the children needed to shed tears; the tears were symbolic of the rains to come to replenish the earth (Arden 2011:139).

Chichén Itzá

Chichén Itzá (Figure 1), a major city centre, was the prime location for ritual child sacrifice. Children were deposited into the Sacred Cenote and within building architecture during the time of construction, at Chichén Itzá (Arden 2011:135). At the Caracol (figure 3), an observatory, in Chichén Itzá, the skeletal remains of children were found dispersed behind a

lower platform stairway among other locations within the architecture (Miller 2008:166-167). This suggests that the sacrifice of children held a type of blessing for the building being erected, perhaps in further requesting blessings from celestial beings. The Sacred Cenote (figure 4), an important site for sacrificial ritual, is located 300m North of the most northern precinct in Chichén Itzá (Price et al. 2018:101). At the Sacred Cenote, archaeological excavations have uncovered skeletal remains of both sub-adults and children over the age of 4; these were the most common demographics of remains uncovered from multiple excavations (Arden 2011:137). By 2007, the skeletal remains of a minimum number of individuals (MNI) of 101, under the age of eighteen, have been uncovered from the cenote (Price et al. 2018:101).

The Aztec Empire

Deities of Creation and Environment

The Aztec empire was located in modern-day Mexico (Figure 1). The timeframe in focus is the Postclassic period (AD 900-1521) (Iverson 2017:94, 99; Webster and Evans 2013:634-635). Human sacrifice was not viewed as a barbaric act, but rather a ritual of honour (De León 2010:280). The first deities sacrificed themselves to keep the cosmos alive and create new deities (De León 2010:280). Human sacrifice to appease deities, such as Quetzalcoatl, occasionally referred to as Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl (De La Cruz et al. 2008:524) the deity of corn, fertility, and winds (James 2000:913) or Tlaloc the water deity (De León 2010:280), was an honourable death. Additionally to requesting elemental favours from deities, children were sacrificed throughout the year for calendrical-based events, in preparation for warfare, or to celebrate other important events (Enríquez 2021:86-87). This suggests the lives of children were viewed as extremely valuable to exchange for blessings from deities.

Quetzalcoatl brought the Aztec people into existence by sacrificing his bodily fluids (De León 2010:283) to create them. The sacrifice of a child would be to please the deity by giving back to Quetzalcoatl what was borrowed because the blood of the children would feed celestial bodies (James 2000:904). Quetzalcoatl was an important figure representing the cycle of violent endings and new beginnings (De León 2010:283); the same cycle was experienced during a sacrifice. Tlaloc was the rain deity to whom most of the rain-based child sacrifices were dedicated (Enríquez 2021:84, 86; Granziera 2005:82). As a rain deity, Tlaloc had the power to determine crop yields, famine, and natural disasters making spring the primary season for ritual child sacrifices (James 2002:338; Morales-Arce et al. 2019:3461). Tears from the children dedicated to Tlaloc were symbolic of the rains the Aztecs hoped would come in return for their tributes (James 2000:904-905; James 2002:337; Enríquez 2021:86).

Tlatelolco

Archaeological excavations conducted at a temple dedicated to Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl (De La Cruz et al. 2008:519) in Tlatelolco (Figure 5), in current-day Mexico City, have uncovered the remains of ritualistic child sacrifices. 31 of the individuals uncovered were subadults, seventeen of them being under the age of 3 (De La Cruz et al. 2008:519). Pathologies examined from the skeletal remains indicate the sacrificed children suffered from disease coinciding with famine (De La Cruz et al, 2008:525). The pathologies suggest the sacrifices may have been conducted to bring rains that would result in better crop yields and therefore more food to sustain the population. The remains were uncovered beneath a platform (De La Cruz et al. 2008:519), suggesting architectural resting places were incorporated with ritualistic sacrifice of children (De La Cruz et al. 2008:519). Tributes at the temple for Ehecatl-Quetzacoatl were an indirect method of sacrificing children for Tlaloc (De La Cruz et al. 2008:524), meaning that all the sacrifices

would be to please both deities at the same time. In pleasing the deities, the Aztecs would have rain, sun, and winds for crop yields to support the livelihood of their people.

Tula, Hidalgo - Tula Grande

Tula (Tula Grande), Hidalgo was a plaza composed of various erected structures (Healan 2012:61), in modern-day Mexico, originally built by the Toltec people. The Toltecs thrived at Tula between the years of AD 900-1150 (Iverson 2017:94). The three phases of Aztec occupation at the site began in AD 1150 and lasted until the battles with the Spanish in AD 1521 (Iverson 2017:99-100). In 2007 and 2009, archaeological excavations were conducted directly outside the southeastern corner of Tula (Enríquez 2021:88). Bioarchaeological remains of children in seated positions uncovered at the site suggest it was used for a mass child sacrifice. 47 of the 49 identified remains belonged to subadults to children as young as newborns (Enríquez 2021:84, 87, 90-91). Pathologies from the remains coincide with ailments associated with famine (Enríquez 2021:91). The demographic and pathologies of the bioarchaeological remains suggest the children sacrificed in the mass grave were a desperate offering to Tlaloc in hopes of receiving rain to alleviate famine.

The Inca Empire

The Inca empire, located in modern-day South America (Figure 2), ruled during the Late Horizon period (AD 1413-1532) (Ceruti 1015:1-2). The capital of Cuzco (Figure 2) was located in the Peruvian Mountains (Figure 7), the geographical location of Inca child sacrifices (Ceruti 1015:1). The Incas populated areas known today as Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, Argentina, and Chile (Gómez-Carballa et al. 2015). During the peak of the Inca empire, the population hovered at around 12 million people (Gómez-Carballa et al. 2015). In having such a large population, the Inca had many children to choose from for ritualistic sacrifices.

The Value of Children in Life and Death

Ritualistic child sacrifice was a major aspect of politics and religion; it would have been a great honour to be a sacrifice for the empire. The children chosen for sacrifice met high standards for beauty in the empire (Gómez-Carballea et al. 2015). Children were perceived as immaculate, rendering them perfect candidates to communicate with deities in the afterlife (Ceruti 2015:7; Reinhard and Ceruti 2005:16). These sacrifices were conducted during times of celebration, in times of need, and to honour worshipped deities. Children were sacrificed for Emperor coronations, during the erections of architecture, and to please deities in exchange for elemental blessings (Eekhout and Owens 2008:392). Often, the children sacrificed during the erections of architecture were buried alive (Eekhout and Owens 2008:392), while the children laid to rest in the mountains were not. Children laid to rest in the mountains after sacrifice were thought to communicate with their ancestors and deities (Ceruti 2015:3-4).

Male children were sacrificed at young ages, typically between the ages of 4 and 7 (Toohey 2013:166; Ceruti 2015:7). Female children were housed together in Cuzco until their early teens (Ceruti 2015:7). During their years in waiting, the girls lived as state wives and produced staple goods such as textiles or beer (Toohey 2013:166). Having important responsibilities gave the young girls a sense of duty and purpose in both life and death. In death, the children were worshipped at their final resting places. They were revered as messengers to the deities they were sacrificed for (Toohey 2013:166). Bioarchaeological evidence from the remains of the sacrificed children indicates they did not suffer from pathologies coinciding with famine (Ceruti 2015:7). This suggests that the children chosen for ritual sacrifice were well looked after, reflecting their value to the empire.

Capacocha

The Capacocha ritual sacrifices were vital parts of calendrical celebrations, political events, and responses to unprecedented natural disasters (Reinhard and Ceruti 2005:9). Capacocha rituals were performed to appease Inti, the sun deity, after natural disasters or to ensure enough crop yields to feed the large population (Arriaza et al. 2018:1325; Ceruti 2015:2-3). These rituals were commonly executed in the Andean mountains at high altitudes, which were also the final resting place of the chosen children (Reinhard and Ceruti 2005:1). Choosing to rest the sacrificed children at the peaks of mountains demonstrates the importance of these geological locations. In celebration of coronations, mass sacrifices of children were conducted, involving around two hundred children (Ceruti 2015:2-3). The bodies of the children were manipulated into upright, fetal-like positions for their final burials (Reinhard and Ceruti 2005:25).

Pachacamac: the Deity and Site

Pachacamac was the deity of creation and earthquakes, worshipped by the Inca (Eeckhout and Owens 2008:387). The Inca site of Pachacamac (Figure 8), dedicated to the deity of the same name was located on the coast of modern-day Peru (Eeckhout and Owens 2008:377). This site was important for Inca rituals, such as that of Capacocha. At Pachacamac, the remains of children under the age of twelve were uncovered within the foundation layer of the central plaza (Eeckhout and Owens 2008:387). The location and preservation of the remains of the children suggest they were sacrificed and purposely placed within the foundation during the construction, as a form of offering to the deity himself (Eeckhout and Owens 2008:387). The plaza at the site of Pachacamac was built on top of ancestral burial grounds, suggesting the child sacrifices were offerings to appease Pachacamac and to avoid angering the ancestors previously laid to rest (Eeckhout and Owens 2008:387-388).

Discussion

Considering that human behaviour is universal in the human species, similarities surface between cultures that both have and have not interacted with one another over time. Religion and culture are based on environment and landscapes. Throughout the Americas, deities represented aspects of the environment, such as rain and the sun. For the Maya, Aztec, and, Inca, the existence of deities based on celestial beings and fertility represented what could be heard, felt, seen, tasted, and touched. Agriculture was the main source of nutrition (Granziera 2005:81), meaning that fertility was important to all three cultures. In cultures worshipping celestial bodies seen in the sky, sacrifice has often been the chosen method of tribute to maintain harmony on earth (Alanís 2008:190). The sacrifice of a population's most precious demographic was a sound tradeoff to celestial beings in exchange for their elemental blessings and protection. Ritual child sacrifice appears to have been a shared form of dedication to deities across all three cultures, especially concerning the elements. All three cultures, separate from one another, believed that children held supernatural abilities and could communicate with beings from another realm. Although there were differences in deposition locations for the sacrificed children, all locations were related to fertility and the underworld and/or afterlife.

Concluding Remarks

People did not always possess a false concept of dualism, that they are not a part of their environment. The Maya, Aztec, and Inca people understood that they were part of their surroundings, just the same as the elements and other species (Larmon 2020:37). In this understanding, they offered their bodies up for tribute to their deities. Offering up people as sacrifices would not have been viewed as immoral or inhumane; the idea was to give up precious commodities in exchange for the greater good of each empire. In a time when contemporary laws

and schools of thought did not yet exist, the sacrifice of children is logical. In contemporary times there are still various spiritual beliefs surrounding the supposed supernatural abilities of children and their abilities to communicate with the dead. This is arguably comparable to the concept of sacrificing children to better communicate with the spiritual beings that adults cannot see; ancestors and deities. In eliminating the hard boundaries in the archaeological record, the false idea that all humans are not the same is also removed. Regardless of culture, location, or period, the human experience is within the same vein. With the acceptance that people are relatively similar no matter their place of origin, we can better interpret findings in the archaeological record by referring to knowledge already possessed. No artefact is ever beyond the capabilities of human thought, therefore it is likely to be repeated during the span of mankind, and in turn, better interpreted.

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Figures



Figure 1. Map of Aztec and Maya Empire (Britannica 2020)



Figure 2. Map of Inca Territory (Freemanpedia 2014)



Figure 3. Caracol in Chichén Itzá. (National Geographic 2018)



Figure 4. Sacred Cenote (National Geographic 2018)



Figure 5. Ruins of Tlatelolco, Mexico City (Britannica 2013)

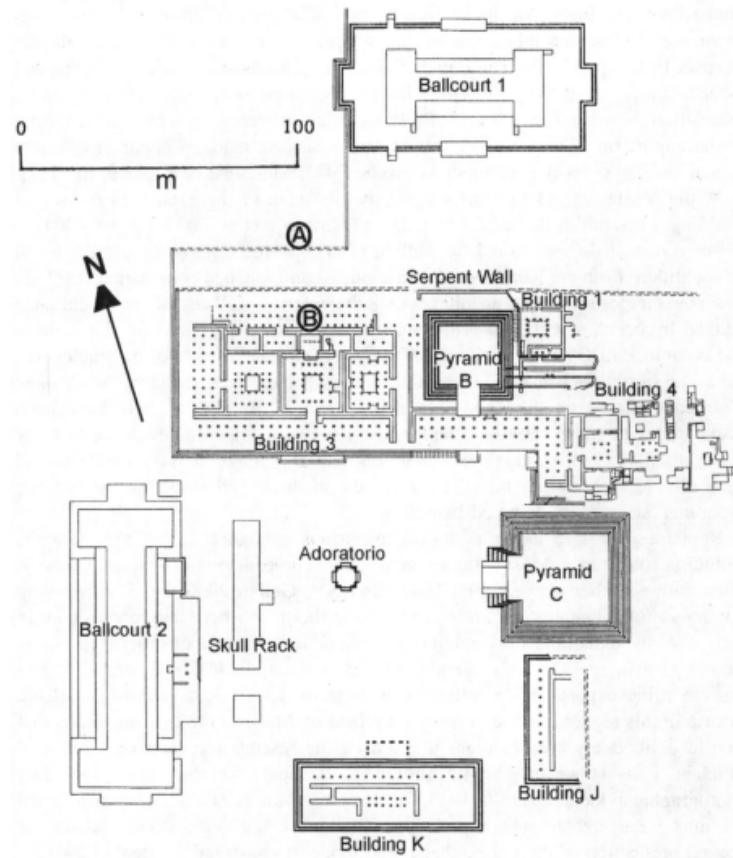


Figure 6. Tula Grande (Healan 2012:61)

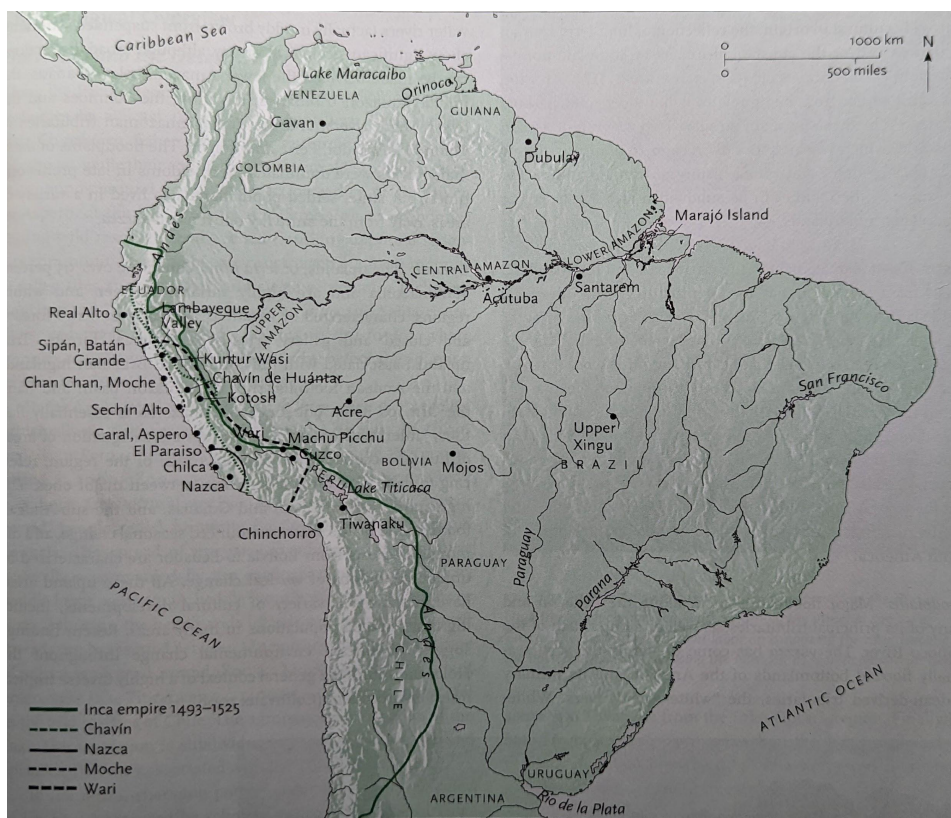


Figure 7. Path of Peruvian Mountains (Mosely and Heckenberger 2013:643)



Figure 8. Site of Pachacamac (Google 2008)