

Crossroads of Culture in Ancient Nicaragua

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New Neolithic World Discovered

America's First Underground Railroad

Divine Lords of the Andes

Decoding a Silk Road Script

PLUS:
Painting the Parthenon
Egyptian Snake Spells
Indonesian Shark Knives
Roman Guard Dog



LIVING BY RITUAL

Regular readers of this magazine will be familiar with the idea that archaeologists often interpret sites and artifacts as having had ritual significance to people of the past. Scholars often joke among themselves that, when confronted with a puzzling feature of the archaeological record, they can be perhaps overly hasty to invoke ritual as a catchall interpretation. But when you enjoy the stories in this issue, you'll find abundant examples of discoveries that show that spiritual beliefs and the rituals they inspired were, in fact, an integral part of people's lives.



You'll read about the Parthenon, where the Athenians worshipped their patron goddess Athena, and about the scientist who has pinpointed the exact pigment ancient artists applied to its spectacular sacred sculptures. Often people's rituals invoked supernatural beings, such as those associated with ceramics from the holy site of Tiwanaku, in Bolivia, where fantastical creatures that scholars call Decapitator Deer and Monstrous Bird were worshipped.

Supernatural creatures also feature in a story about rituals surrounding death in the Roman world. Archaeologists have recently discovered a tomb decorated with images of the mythical three-headed dog Cerberus—who guarded the entrance to the underworld—along with human-horse-fish hybrids called ichthyocentaurs.

Rituals concerning the acquisition of power in first-millennium A.D. Peru played a central role in the political lives of a people known as the Recuay. The Recuay leaders established their right to rule based on a complex system of practices tied to divine ancestors. And few sites have been discovered in recent decades whose sacred importance rivals Turkey's Neolithic Taş Tepeler landscape. The site of Karahantepe, for example, features ritual spaces archaeologists call "special structures," where people practiced initiation rites and gathered for ritual activities.

Rituals related to magical artifacts are highlighted in several stories. A cache of seemingly mundane but powerful objects was found along the road to Mecca where Islamic wonderworkers performed magic to keep pilgrims safe during the journey. The pilgrimage, known as the hajj, is among the most sacred duties required of all Muslims able to complete it during their lives. In another article, you will read about the discovery of a tomb in Abusir belonging to an Egyptian scribe who must have been deathly afraid of snakes. His newly excavated burial chamber is covered in spells meant to ward off serpents and snakebites. There are even magicians themselves to be found in these pages. In the eighteenth or nineteenth century, a Finnish sage known as Kinolainen was thought to display his supernatural power to heal the sick and perform magic in a uniquely shaped mountain cave.

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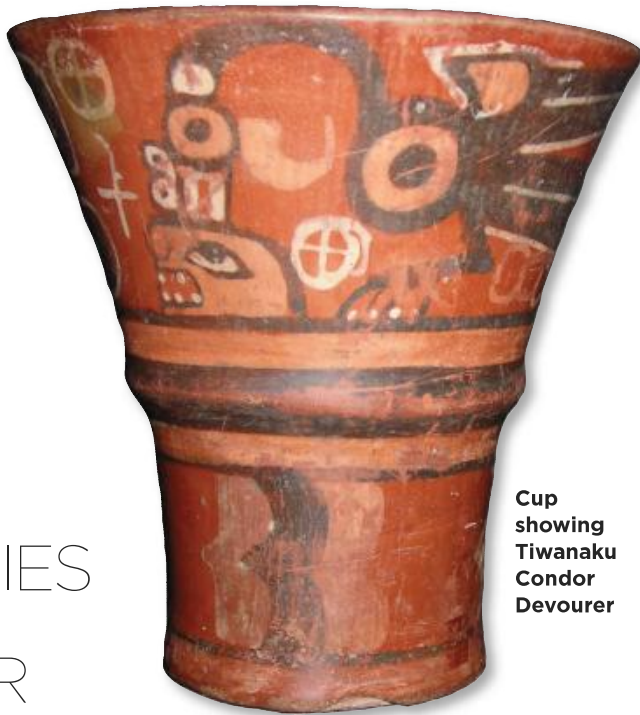
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SIX CENTURIES OF THE CONDOR

People belonging to several different Andean societies lived in and around the city of Tiwanaku near Bolivia's Lake Titicaca from around A.D. 590 to 1150. Tiwanaku was the most important political and religious Andean center of its era. Its ritual precincts featured intricately worked megalithic structures and massive stone carvings, many of which depict mythological beasts that scholars refer to as "sacrificers" and "decapitators." Some of these motifs, such as those known as Decapitator Deer and Monstrous Bird, represent fantastic animals using weapons to behead humans.

Archaeologist David Trigo Rodríguez of the Higher University of San Simón and researcher Roberto Carlos Hidalgo of Simón Bolívar Andean University recently studied a related, but overlooked, Tiwanaku motif that appears on tablets used to consume snuff as well as on ritual cups known as *keros* that contained chicha, or corn beer. This motif, which is found on objects unearthed outside the city, features a realistic depiction of a condor scavenging human or animal corpses. Rodríguez and Hidalgo have



Cup showing Tiwanaku Condor Devourer

dubbed the bird the Tiwanaku Condor Devourer. "We suggest the theme of the Tiwanaku Condor Devourer was related to rites of rural societies," says Rodríguez. Perhaps, he adds, people living in Tiwanaku's hinterland frequently observed condors eating carrion and chose to incorporate naturalistic depictions of the fearsome bird into their rituals in ways residents of the city did not.

—ERIC A. POWELL

Tiwanaku-style condor effigy vessel



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