

National Geographic spotlights Tulane professor's work

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Tulane anthropology professor John Verano discusses his work at the sites of mass child sacrifices in Peru more than 500 years ago. (Video by Carolyn Scofield)

A Tulane University professor's excavation of the site of a mass child sacrifice that took place more than 500 years ago on the northern coast of Peru is featured in the February issue of *National Geographic* magazine.

The article, titled "[An Unthinkable Sacrifice,](#)" provides much more detail about the findings than had previously been revealed, including how some of the children were killed, how they were buried and the growing number of skeletons recovered from ongoing excavations.

It features stunning photography, including a headdress of macaw feathers adorning the skull of a sacrificed child and another of archaeology students cleaning and cataloguing remains. The issue is available on newsstands Jan. 29.

Tulane anthropology professor [John Verano](#) and Gabriel Prieto of the Universidad Nacional de Trujillo along with a team of students from their respective universities have been working at the Huanchaquito site since 2011 when children playing in the sand dunes found human bones scattered over the surface. Verano joined Prieto to assist with the excavation and analysis of the human remains, which by 2016 comprised more than 140 children and 200 young llamas.

Since then, a second site of mass child killings has been found, this one at Pampa la Cruz, located on a high hill above the town of Huanchaco. The discovery now puts the total number of sacrificed children at 269 and the number of llamas at 466. Included in this new sample are a number of children with rich offerings.

"We're finding children and young adults with fancy headdresses and wrapped in textiles," he said.

Verano also noted gruesome details necessary to gain a full understanding of the ritualized killings, including the fact that some victims died in different ways including strangulation and blunt force trauma.

To date, most children at the two sites were found with an incision across the chest and were buried in plain shrouds. At Pampa La Cruz Prieto uncovered a large copper knife that may have been used to sacrifice the children.

Even before the discovery of the second site, this was one of the largest discoveries of child sacrifice anywhere in the world according to Verano. Archaeological evidence suggests that the region was experiencing devastating floods at the time, and at the first site children were offered as a sacrifice to persuade the gods to stop the rain.

Prieto and Verano are still researching the causes of the mass sacrifice at Pampa la Cruz. “We’re not seeing as much evidence of rainfall, which makes us wonder whether this was a ceremony done at another time of crisis.”

National Geographic's Explorer episode about this discovery will air February 11, 6 p.m. (ET).

Verano recently spent his winter vacation in Peru studying the new finds, and plans to return again in June. His work is supported by the National Geographic Society, along with grants from the Carol Lavin Bernick Family Foundation and the Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane.

Verano said it’s crucial that the work be completed in a timely manner. “This discovery is very important, and we need to document it before the site is lost to urban expansion.”

Media interested in photos from the *National Geographic* article should contact Anna Kukelhaus at Anna.Kukelhaus@natgeo.com.

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Tulane anthropology professor John Verano