



PRESS RELEASE

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9,500-year-old funerary rituals involving the reduction of fresh corpses discovered in east central Brazil

Findings from Lapa do Santo show oldest evidence in the continent of humans performing elaborated funerary rituals based on the manipulation and reduction of fresh corpses and the reorganization of body parts.

In eastern South America skeletal remains dating to 10,000 years ago are rare, precluding the proper study of their ritual dimensions. In a study published this week in the journal *Antiquity* an international research team led by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, and the University of São Paulo, Brazil, present their new findings on 26 human burials that date to this period and had been discovered at the archaeological cave site Lapa do Santo in east central Brazil.



Image: 9,500-year-old skull cap used as funerary receptacle. The mutilated and burnt bones of the same individual were deposited inside (Credit: LEEH-USP).

“The Lagoa Santa region is known since the early 19th century due to the work of the Danish naturalist Peter Lund. During the following decades, many international research teams went to the region looking for evidence of the coexistence between humans and megafauna”, says André Strauss of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. “Although hundreds of early Holocene skeletons were exhumed in the process little has been reported about funerary rituals. Therefore, the ample diversity and elevated elaboration of the burials at Lapa do Santo at first struck us as a great surprise.”

The use of Lapa do Santo as an interment ground started between 10,300 and 10,600 years ago with the burial of complete skeletons. Between 9,400 and 9,600 years ago the reduction of the body by means of mutilation, defleshing, tooth removal, exposure to fire and possibly cannibalism, followed by the secondary burial of the remains according to strict rules, became a central element in the treatment of the dead.

In the absence of monumental architecture or grave goods, these groups were using parts of fresh corpses to elaborate their rituals, showing this practice was not restricted to the Andean region at the beginning of the Holocene. Between 8,200 and 8,600 years ago another change occurred whereby pits were instead filled with disarticulated bones of a single individual without signs of body manipulation. Those changes show that during the early Archaic, Lagoa Santa was a region inhabited by dynamic groups that were in constant transformation over a period of centuries.



Image: Burial 34 during exhumation in 2014 (Credit: André Strauss).

“In reconstructing the life of past populations, human burials are highly informative of symbolic and ritual behavior. In this frame, the funerary record presented in this study highlights that the human groups inhabiting east South America at 10,000 years ago were more diverse and sophisticated than previously thought”, says Strauss. “The strong emphasis on the reduction of fresh corpses explains why these fascinating mortuary practices were not recognized during almost two centuries of research in the region.”

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André Strauss, Rodrigo Elias Oliveira, Ximena S. Villagran, Danilo V. Bernardo, Domingo C. Salazar-García, Marcos César Bissaro, Francisco Pugliese, Tiago Hermenegildo, Rafael Santos, Alberto Barioni, Emiliano Castro de Oliveira, João Carlos Moreno de Sousa, Klervia Jaouen, Max Ernani, Mark Hubbe, Mariana Inglez, Marina Gratão, H. Rockwell, Márcia Machado, Gustavo de Souza, Farid Chemale, Koji Kawashita, Tamsin C. O'Connell, Isabel Israde, James Feathers, Claudio Campi, Michael Richards, Joachim Wahl, Renato Kipnis, Astolfo Araujo and Walter Neves

Early Holocene ritual complexity in South America: the archaeological record of Lapa do Santo (east-central Brazil)

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Contact:

André Strauss
Department of Human Evolution
Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig
Phone: +49 (0)152 583 995 56
Email: andre_strauss@eva.mpg.de

Sandra Jacob
Press and Public Relations
Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig
Phone: +49 (0)341 3550-122
Email: jacob@eva.mpg.de