

Discovering the New World's Richest Unlooted Tomb

By WALTER ALVA DIRECTOR, BRÜNING ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, PERU

Photographs by BILL BALLEMBERG

LIKE MANY A DRAMA, this one starts violently, with the death of a tomb robber in the first act.

The chief of police rang me near midnight; his voice was urgent: "We have



BOTH BY MARTHA COOPER

OVERLOOKED by thieves who ransacked this 1,500-year-old Peruvian tomb, an ornate copper scepter is examined by the author, left. Salvage reaped a windfall when, nearby, he uncovered a sealed royal tomb bursting with wonders.

510

something you must see—right now." Hurrying from where I live and work—the Brüning Archaeological Museum in Lambayeque, Peru—I wondered which of the many ancient pyramids and ceremonial platforms that dot my country's arid north coast had been sacked of its treasures this time.

Pillaging tombs has long provided extra money for many people in the Lambayeque Valley. As cash income dries up between sugarcane harvests, villagers of Sipán speculatively eye an imposing, flat-topped pyramid and a massive adobe platform nearby, and gangs of looters put new edges on their shovels.

These structures were built by a people known as the Moche. From about A.D. 100 to the close of the seventh century these agricultural Indians flourished in the desert margin between the Andes and the Pacific, raising huge monuments of sunbaked mud and laying within them their noblest dead.

They also buried fine gold and pottery so alluring that in decades of excavation archaeologists have rarely found a major Moche tomb unplundered. The artifacts, and the priceless knowledge they represent, almost always disappear in an insatiable international black market for stolen pre-Columbian treasures. What awaited me at the police station in February 1987, I was sure, would be but the poorest castoffs of a grave robber.

Such castoffs! Among 33 antiquities confiscated from a local looter's house were the gilded copper faces of two jaguar-like felines (right), baring shell fangs. A pair of gold peanuts gleamed three times natural size,



(otro lado)

Allí atrás ven al Dr. W. Alva en pleno
trabajo: Conatula del ARTICULAZO que salió
a todo color en el "Geographic Magazine" en
octubre. Como ven, pg 510.

En la página 545 ven el nombre del
Dr. J. Verano: muchacho muy simpático y sencillo,
con gran cáinnos por el Perú: le he hablado de
Uds. y le he dicho que "no sería raro que
los 4 no reuñamos alrededor de una mesa
en el Sheraton a comer un CEVICHE
con CHICHA !! " ¡¡ Jajaja!

Hasta vernos bien pronto!

...rge as silver dollars
...ed the royal chest.
...med like miniature
...d been enlarged, as
...t the necklace had
...not simply for occa-
...s of wear identified
...ding clamshell-like
...kers.

...copper sandals we
...the Lord of Sipán.
...they were impossi-
...alking. Not that it
...Moche sovereigns

...nk seemed endless.
...es—two large gold
...caps of cane fiber
...e cotton thread and
...delles of gilded cop-
...ffin bore traces of
...e copper-handled

...old and turquoise
...lets, and thousands
...hell beads formed
...gs. Five of these
...ders of the Lord of
...legs; four more lay

...ur: atlatl darts and
...b with a shield in

...with a gold cham-
...erted pyramid. Its
...ured with shields
...nated in a wicked-

...ttle chamber were
...these a man wore
...egalia of a Moche
...f a hapless prison-
...r club at his head,
...ce of prisoners for
...the rattle with the

*a backflap
is weighed
colleague,
or's request,
rnnment's
g behind
l and silver
1 to the
m.*

queasy suspicion that the Lord of Sipán had known all too well how to wield this symbol of his rank.

AND WHAT OF HIM, that fierce aristocrat: How did he die? Was he young or old? Did his people lament his passing? Bones in the tomb answer some of these questions.

First-millennium bones are often brittle, ephemeral things, and the skeleton of the Lord of Sipán was largely blackened splinters. We gathered shards of the skull, crushed as the timbers vaulting the coffin recess decayed and earth settled. Of other bones we found, only four vertebrae and the two heel bones remained whole.

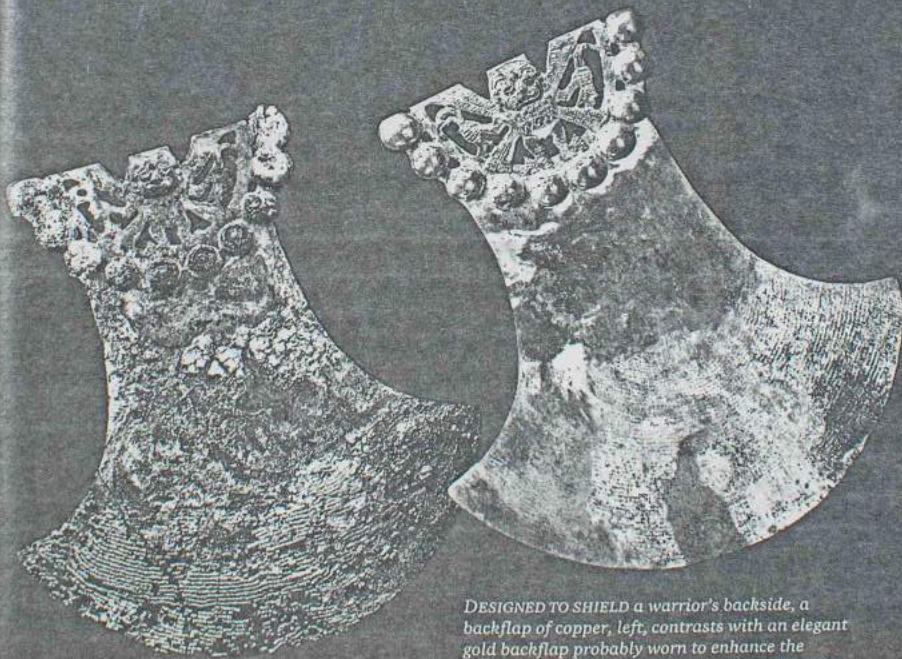
We could not extricate this skeleton, like a fossil in stone, as we had the guardian's: That would damage artifacts lower down in the coffin. But coats of acrylic preservative hardened

the disjointed bones in a unifying matrix of surrounding sediment; slipping slats of wood underneath, we carefully raised the skeleton.

From the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C., physical anthropologist Dr. John Verano came to examine it. He gauged the Lord of Sipán to be five and a half feet tall and in his early 30s when he died. His back may have stiffened a bit at times from incipient arthritis, and a cavity etched a canine, but his full set of teeth showed little wear.

To what could this man in his prime have succumbed? We can rule out poor diet and prolonged bone-damaging or deforming diseases. But not, say, sudden death in an epidemic. Suddenly or no, the Lord of Sipán departed his people prematurely. A shocked society must have momentarily tottered, shaken and unbalanced.

And balance was mystically, profoundly important to the Moche. An eerie sense of this



DESIGNED TO SHIELD a warrior's backside, a backflap of copper, left, contrasts with an elegant gold backflap probably worn to enhance the ruler's power. Crescent-shaped bells showing the decapitator god crown both.