

Face of Early Indigenous Cuban Chief May Be Revealed

Restorers from the Baracoa Archeological Museum and foreign anthropologists reproduced the face of an indigenous person believed to be Guama, a famous Taino chief.

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BARACOA, Guantanamo — Whatever is the true identity behind human bones found in February 2003 near the Boma mountain range in eastern Cuba, there is no doubt of its restless spirit. It seeks to reveal its own history. Now, it is likely to reveal its face to the modern world

A team of restorers from the Cueva El Paraíso (Paradise Cave) Archeological Museum located in the Cuba's oldest city, Baracoa--working in collaboration with foreign anthropologists, reproduced the face of an indigenous person whose bones are on exhibition at the museum. The individual is believed to have been chief Guama, the leader of the bloodiest, longest and most effective early uprising against Spanish colonialism, between 1522 and 1532

The image was reproduced from remains found in February, 2003 in La Vigia cave, where a great deal of historic-archaeological evidence was also discovered that is tied to Guama.

For six months, the experts worked on making a plaster mould using the cranial cavity of the body. They applied the pivot technique to underpin the soft facial tissue around his face, explained one of the authors, young restorer Andrey Guilarte.

"We made a plaster mold of the original skull and placed 32 pivots around its face. Then we filled it with a special plaster to get the specific details," said Guilarte.

"This was a complex process which required time, precision and accuracy – three essential elements to achieve a faithful portrait of the early figure being studied," said the co-director of the project, who is working with sculptors Noel Countin and Bernardo Milhet. The team also comprises American archaeologists Sharyn Thompson, Canadian Susan Hurlich and Cuban collaborator Yanexi Pelier.

"This is possibly the first reproduction in Cuba of the face of an indigenous person, at least the first we've heard of," said Professor Roberto Orduñez Fernández, director of the museum and the Archaeological Society in Baracoa.

WEIGHING EVIDENCE

Researcher Ordunez is the staunchest defenders of the theory that the subject in question is Guama, or someone very influenced by the Taino people (one of the indigenous peoples living in Cuba before Spanish colonization). Ordunez' hypothesis gained support following the results of Carbon 14 test conducted in August 2004.

A sample of archaeological debris collected at the site where the bones were discovered, and tested by international experts, pointed to the body as having been buried in a grave of so-called archaic groups who arrived in Cuba 160 years before the Tainos.

The estimated date of the remains go back 1,020. The sample dates back to 472 years (+/-20) before the arrival of Christopher Columbus, and 160 years before the agrarian-potter groups. Therefore, the cave from which the archaeological debris was collected was inhabited by a human group around the year 1000 AD.

"The body being studied, based on frontal and occipital deformation and pottery accompanying the remains, appears to be a member of one of the Taino groups which came to Cuban shores between 1100 or 1200 AD," said archaeologist Ordunez.

"Since this is the only pottery buried in the cave, we presume that the body was moved within the context of a funeral organized by the archaic groups for an unknown reason, although we can assume that it was hidden or used in the practice of some special cult," he added.

"We should bear in mind that the first Spanish colonizers were already profaning and sacking the tombs of the indigenous to steal the riches of the former leaders of those communities," said Ordunez.

The bones on exhibition at the Baracoa Archaeological Museum belonged to a subject that was buried in a crouching position and surrounded by several ceremonial pieces and objects typical of indigenous burials. These included "one esferalita stone, a large one indicating the importance of the deceased; a necklace of serium with a hanging amulet; a pot with an offering of 'caracolu-caracolu s' and 'polidantes,' which were presents for travel to the 'other world;' and other ceremonial stones," recalled Ordunez.

The specialist highlighted that the skeleton has a fracture in its forehead, which resulted from a lethal blow. This detail helps confirm that the body belonged to a male around his forties, which matches the description of Guama.

To top off all the coincidences, there is the shadow of a presumably attractive woman seasoning this enigmatic tale. There are documented testimonies —says Professor Orduñez— confirming that Guama did not die a victim of Spanish bullets, but to the blow of an axe in his forehead by his brother Olgua while the chief was sleeping. The act of violence could have been caused by jealousy, since Guama kidnapped his sister-in-law, according to the testimonies of members of Guama's guerrilla band.

"Once we receive the results of the DNA tests —a very expensive test being carried out by Norwegian anthropologist Richard Daly— we can determine the exact age of the man, the diseases he suffered from, the meals he ate and with all those details we can pin point his native geographical position and other really valuable information," says the director of the Baracoa Archaeological Museum.

**Source: Juventud Rebelde.co.cu 11 Dec. 2006*