

Massive, Ancient Building Discovered In The Andes

By Thomas H. Maugh II, Los Times

Stunning find in remote area stumps archaeologists

On the heavily forested eastern slope of the Andes, Peruvian farmers have discovered a massive ruin whose unusual size and shape promise to shed new light on the relationship between the Chachapoya and the Inca warriors who destroyed their civilization.

The rectangular, block-like structure — nicknamed Huaca La Penitenciaría or Penitentiary Ruins — is reminiscent of Inca architectural style, but a large frieze across its front is the signature of the Chachapoya— the so-called Cloud People of ancient Peru.

The unusual conjunction of traits, as well as its location at a lower elevation and much further east than the Chachapoya empire was previously known to sprawl, hint that it might have been built by forced Chachapoya labor under the direction of Inca rulers, said Keith Muscutt, a Chachapoya expert who described the find last week at a meeting in San Francisco of the Institute for Andean Studies.

“We are dealing with a startlingly large, functionally specialized structure that we do not understand at all,” said archaeologist Warren Church of Columbus State University in Georgia, who was not involved in the find. “It is enormous, and to find it where we find it is really strange.”

For at least 600 years, until the late 15th century, the Chachapoya amassed an extensive empire in the high Andes, building large cities, controlling complex trading routes and practicing a little-understood form of shamanism.

Nobody knows where the Chachapoya came from, but starting about 1,300 years ago, they began to spread through an area known as the “Ceja de Selva,” or Eyebrow of the Jungle, reaching a population of about 500,000. They are renowned for their mountaintop citadels, such as Kuelap and Gran Pajaten.

Their downfall began around 1470, when the Inca began a war of conquest against them, resulting in their subjugation. Soon after, the Spanish came and conquered the Inca. Ultimately, infectious diseases brought by the Europeans killed as many as 98 percent of the Cloud People.

The Penitentiary Ruins were discovered and named by three local farmers: Octavio, Merlin and Edison Anazco. They conveyed the news to Muscutt, an assistant dean at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who was in the area on a project for the Discovery Channel.

The site was accessible only by mule trail, “a big gruesome trail, very steep,” Muscutt said. “The animals were often up to their bellies in mud.”

The ruins sit on a plateau called La Meseta between the Rio Verde and Rio Huabayacu. It is about two days by foot to the nearest village, La Morada.

The ruins are heavily overgrown by the cloud forest, complete with spider monkeys, jaguars and other nocturnal predators. Muscutt estimated that 98 percent of the ruin is heavily overgrown with trees, vines and moss. “You can’t stand back and photograph it or fly over it” and take a picture, he said.

Muscutt performed no clearing or excavation at the site, but he was able to obtain rough measurements of the ruins. The site is dominated by a large ceremonial platform about 200 feet wide, 100 feet deep and 24 feet high. It is made of dry stone or “pirca” — essentially cut stone piled in courses with no binding to hold it together.

Because there have been many large earthquakes in the area, Muscutt said, “it must have some kind of internal structure to keep it from collapsing. He could find no openings other than drains, however.

In front of the platform is a large plaza, approximately 200 feet wide and 300 feet long. The top of the platform bears the remains of several square and round buildings and what appears to be a watchtower. The plaza also has the remains of some buildings that appear to have been later additions.

“One of the things that I find extraordinary about this building is that it is clearly a civil, ceremonial building,” Muscutt said. Despite its blocky appearance, “It is not a fortress. It doesn’t have parapets, doesn’t have a moat, doesn’t have a perimeter wall. There is no evidence of warfare at all.”

Also notable is the apparent lack of nearby dwellings where builders or occupants would have lived.

“It strikes me that the Inca were the only people powerful enough and with the wherewithal to insert people into this place to erect this thing in short order, then pull them out again,” Church said.