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UCT academic participates in study which found 9,000-year-old ritualised decapitation in Brazil

University of Cape Town academic, Dr Domingo Carlos Salazar Garcia, recently took part in an international study which discovered a 9,000-year-old case of human decapitation in the Lapa do Santo rock shelter in east-central Brazil.

Researchers discovered the remains of a buried body, Burial 26, which contained a cranium, jaw, the first six cervical vertebrae, and two severed hands at the site in 2007. The amputated hands were laid over the face of the skull arranged opposite each other. The researchers observed V-shaped cut marks on the jaw and sixth cervical vertebra.

The authors believe that the presentation of the remains suggest ritualised decapitation instead of trophy-taking. If this is the case, the remains may demonstrate sophisticated mortuary rituals among hunter-gatherers in the Americas during that period.

Using accelerator mass spectrometry, the researchers dated the remains back to approximately 9,000 years ago.

The study, led by Andre Strauss from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (Germany), challenges the traditional view that decapitation was an Andean phenomenon, since all other archaeological cases occur in the Andes.

It also challenges the Western perspective, which understands decapitation within the context of punishment and inter-group violence.

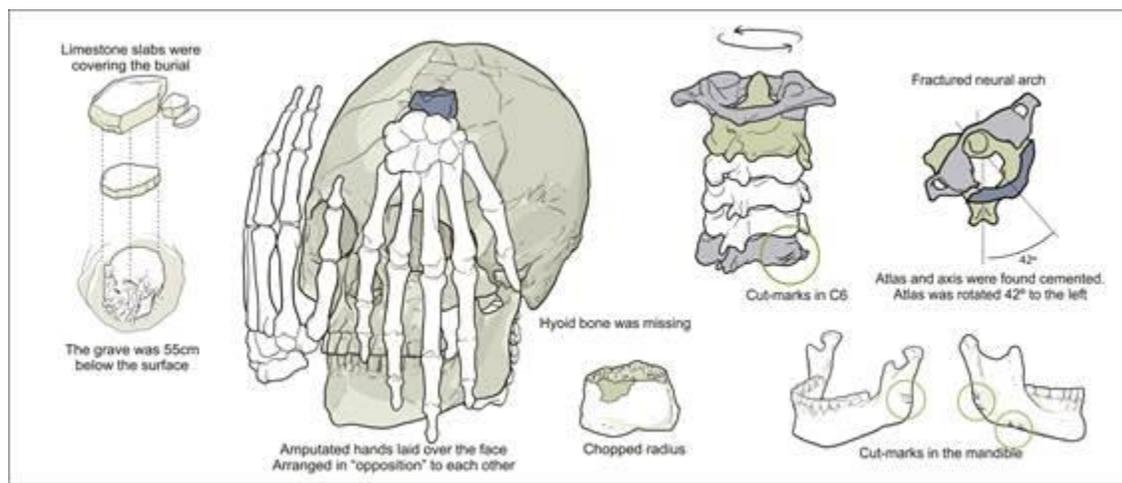
"The strontium analysis comparing Burial 26's isotopic signature to other specimens from Lapa do Santo suggests Burial 26 was likely a local member of the group and not a foreign defeated enemy," says Dr Garcia.

This makes Burial 26 the oldest case of decapitation in South America, followed by one found at the Andean region and dated back to approximately 3,000 years. The study will also lead to the re-evaluation of previous interpretations of the practice, especially its origins and geographic dispersion.

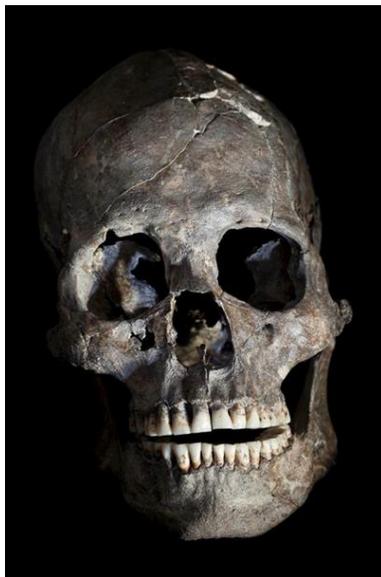
Strauss says: "This ritualised case of decapitation from Lapa do Santo attests to the early sophistication of mortuary rituals among hunter-gatherers in the Americas. The absence of a punitive element provides a venue for the exercise of a radical notion of alterity. In the

apparent absence of wealth goods or elaborate architecture, Lagoa Santa's inhabitants seemed to be using the human body to reify and express their cosmological principles."

The study was published on *PLOS ONE* on Wednesday, 23 September 2015.



Picture 1: Schematic representation of Burial 26 from Lapa do Santo.



Picture 2: Photo of Burial 26's severed head (photo by Maurício de Paiva).

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