

“An Ancient Cemetery at the World’s Fair”

(in Chicago, Illinois)

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NOTE: A short article unrelated to the World’s Fair article is included in the scan of this article at the end. It is about “Russian Jews have a burial custom peculiar to themselves...handsome, silver-mounted burial caskets, to which the bottom is attached by springs....”

This article, which begins on the next page,
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An Ancient Cemetery at the World's Fair.

The burial customs of the ancient Peruvians are curiously illustrated in a section of an old graveyard which is to be seen in the Anthropological building at the World's Fair. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years have intervened since these strange people lived and died, yet their bodies have been so perfectly preserved that they are now on exhibition in Chicago in this wonderful World's Fair year. Not even the approximate date of their existence on the earth is known, but it must have been long centuries ago, for the graveyard of Ancon from which the relics and bodies were taken, was in existence before the Spaniards conquered Peru.

Ancon is twenty-three miles from Lima. It is a desert plain on which the rain never falls. Three square miles of these sandy wastes are occupied by the ancient graveyard. The soil is the usual desert sand, beneath which is a deep layer of gravel. What a site for a cemetery! No verdure, no diversity of hill and vale, only the bare, treeless, cheerless desert plain, on which the sun forever beats mercilessly. There is one advantage, however. The graves in this gravelly soil are forever free from moisture, and the desert is so far removed from the usual haunts of men as to be undisturbed. So thought the centuries—old Peruvians when they planned their cemetery at Ancon.

The burial customs of these ancient people were but rude ceremonies, no coffins being used nor lofty monuments reared to mark their resting place. The sand was first scooped away from the surface, and then holes six to twenty feet deep were dug in the hard gravel. In these natural sepulchers were placed the remains of the dead. The arms were first folded across the breast, the legs bent until the knees nearly touched the chin, and then the body was carefully swathed in cloth and leaves and bound fast with ropes of llama wool or human hair. In this way entire families were sometimes buried together. Husband and wife were placed side by side in a sitting posture. Before them were placed pots of oil, bags of corn and bowls of peanuts. On their sides were hung bags of medicine, with tablets bearing inscriptions which have never been deciphered. Beside the wife a work-box, made of plaited reeds and filled with food and utensils of their primitive home, was usually placed. There was also a simple loom made of six sticks, with combs of cactus needles, and spindles of wood often handsomely inlaid with turquoise or shells. In many of these graves beautiful specimens of pottery are found. Thus in this dry, salt gravel these bodies have reposed undisturbed for many centuries and are now taken out in a state of remarkable preservation.

For the last fifteen years or more the burial ground at Ancon has been sadly desecrated. During the war between Chile and Peru, in 1879, 2,000 Chilean soldiers camped near Ancon, and each day hundreds of graves were opened by them in the search for hidden treasure. All over the three square miles of desert which are occupied by the necropolis are strewn skulls, long bones and cloth which have been taken from the graves by the despoilers. Some of the fabrics made by the ancient Peruvians from the wool of the llama on their primitive looms are almost as fine as cashmere. Fanciful designs were stamped on cloth with wooden dies. Entire garments made of human hair have been found, and one piece of cloth is of brightly colored feathers.

The collection of Ancon relics at the World's Fair was made by Mr. George A. Dorsey, of the Archaeological department. It is the largest collection of the kind in existence and includes the contents of 127 graves. Of this number but two bodies were found buried at full length. These were wrapped in cloth and covered with leaves. The exhibit at the Exposition faithfully reproduces the cemetery just as it appears at Ancon. The mummies appear at the World's Fair city just as they were placed centuries ago in their stony graves, with their pottery, tools, weapons and food about them. In a long row of cases around the reproduced graves are relics taken from the excavations. Here are pieces of dried fish, sea-crabs and various fruits.

Relics from other Peruvian and Chilean graveyards are also shown in the Anthropological building, and it is gratifying to know that this exhibit will remain as a permanent feature of the museum to be established in Chicago after the Fair. The most curious feature of the entire exhibit is that the ancient Peruvians almost invariably chose a desert spot for their graveyards, as in the little island of LaPlata, about thirty miles off the coast of Ecuador, which is now barren and uninhabited. In the graves on this island were found images of gold and silver and pottery of remarkably fine workmanship. The bodies had crumbled to ashes.

Russian Jews have a burial custom peculiar to themselves. In that country the undertakers keep handsome, silver-mounted burial caskets, to which the bottom is attached by springs. After the funeral ceremonies are over, and the coffin has been lowered into the grave, the mourners withdraw and the coffin is lifted out, leaving its bottom and the corpse in the grave. These show caskets are let to the poor at reasonable rates, and they can have a fine funeral at small cost. A Norwich, Conn. undertaker had a request for such a coffin the other day, and being unable to furnish it, the Russian community had one made and will use it hereafter.

Excerpts from the above 1893 article:

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