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Mysterious mummy unearthed in Peru

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A mummy of mystery has come to light in Peru.

She was a woman who died some 1,600 years ago in the heyday of the Moche culture, well before the rise of the Incas. Her imposing tomb suggests someone of high status. Her desiccated remains are covered with red pigment and bear tattoos of patterns and mythological figures.

But the most striking aspect of the discovery, archaeologists said Tuesday, is not the offerings of gold and semiprecious stones or the elaborate wrapping of her body in fine textiles but the other grave goods.

She was surrounded by weaving materials and needles, befitting a woman, and two ceremonial war clubs and 28 spear throwers, or sticks that propel spears. Those items have never been found before in the burial of a Moche woman.

Was she a warrior princess, or perhaps a ruler? Possibly.

"She is elite but somewhat of an enigma," said Dr. John Verano, a physical anthropologist at Tulane University who worked with the Peruvian archaeologists who made the discovery last year.

Dr. Christopher B. Donnan of the University of California-Los Angeles was not a member of the research team but inspected the mummy and the tomb soon after the find. "It's among the richest female Moche burials ever found," said Donnan, an archaeologist of Peruvian culture. "The tomb combines things usually found either exclusively in male or female burials - a real mystery."

The National Geographic Society announced the discovery and is publishing details in its June issue.

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