

THE MOTHER

BY CYNTHIA LEVINSON

THESE PEOPLE WERE UNIQUE IN THEIR TIME—AND OURS!

For tens of thousands of years, our ancestors lived in small tribes or villages. Then, 5,000 to 6,000 years ago, they started to band together and build cities. Why? Archaeologists thought they knew until a professor in Lima, Peru, decided to investigate mysterious rumors.

MOUNDS IN THE DESERT?

Professor Ruth Shady (SHAH-dee) had heard about mounds in a barren desert high in the Andes Mountains. But the tale did not make sense. Why would anyone build in a place where no one could live?

In 1994, Shady, an archaeologist at Peru's University of San Marcos, traveled 100 miles north of Lima. There, she discovered that the rumors were indeed true. She saw a huge hill in the middle of the arid Supe (SOO-pay) Valley. Upon closer inspection, she could see the faint outline of a pyramid under the rubble. A scan of the nearby landscape told her that she was surrounded by more pyramids—all ancient and shadows of what they once had been.

"When I first arrived," Shady said, "I was overwhelmed. The place is somewhere between the seat of the gods and the home of man."

Shady had found a lost city. Carbon dating of the reed fibers revealed that it had been built 4,700 years ago, making it, she believes, the first, or "mother city," of North and South

America. But something was wrong. This mother city, known as Caral, lacked two types of artifacts, both of which had been found in every other early city around the world. So, Shady intensified her search.

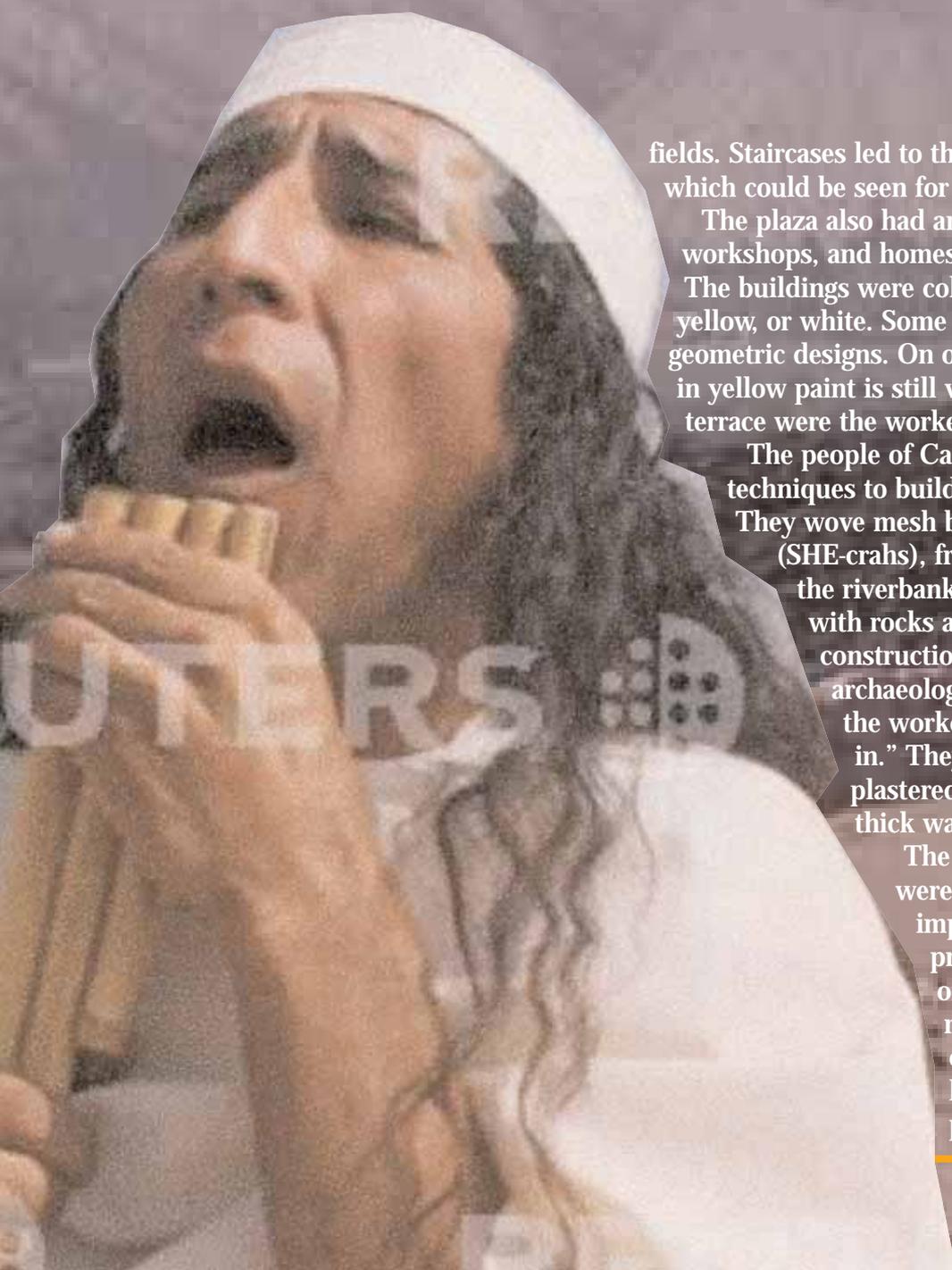
SACRED CITY OF CARAL

The area Shady wanted to survey is so large—more than 160 acres—that she requested help from the Peruvian army. After she taught the soldiers proper digging techniques, they unearthed a high plaza in the center of Caral and a lower terrace in the outskirts of Caral.

Uncovered on the plaza were the remains of six flat-topped pyramids that had been built about the same time as the pyramids in Egypt. They surrounded a sunken ceremonial area that could hold thousands of people. The largest, the *pirámide mayor* (pee-RAH-mee-deh my-OR), was 60 feet in height and stood on a base that was the size of four football

CITY

An actor performs a ceremony at the ancient city of Caral on June 15, 2006, in honor of the people who once inhabited the area.



fields. Staircases led to the Altar of Eternal Fire, which could be seen for miles.

The plaza also had an amphitheater, temples, workshops, and homes for priests and officials. The buildings were colorfully painted in red, yellow, or white. Some were decorated with geometric designs. On one wall a child's handprint in yellow paint is still visible. Along the lower terrace were the workers' plain adobe houses.

The people of Caral developed special techniques to build these huge structures. They wove mesh bags, called *shicras* (SHE-crahs), from reeds growing along the riverbank. They filled the bags with rocks and hauled them to the construction sites. According to archaeologist Winifred Creamer, the workers "threw the whole thing in." They stacked the *shicras* and plastered the sides to make strong, thick walls.

The most important buildings were temples, and the most important people were the priests, scientists, and officials. Priests performed rituals honoring the main deities—the sun, water, and land. Some rituals involved playing flutes carved from



The site at Caral today

pelican or condor bones. Believing that fire was the best way to communicate with the gods, they made burnt offerings of textiles and food. Caral's scientists developed a system of mathematics, measured movements of the constellations, and predicted the weather to establish calendars for fishing and farming.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE DESERT?

Caral sits in a very dry area some 12 miles from the Pacific Ocean. But early settlers were

soon producing bountiful crops of sweet potatoes, beans, pumpkins, and guava. They did this by irrigating the dry land with water diverted from the rivers that flow from the Andes through the valley to the sea. The people of Caral also grew cotton for cloth and to use as a trade item. Fishermen regularly bought cotton to use for weaving their nets. In exchange, the fishermen delivered sardines and anchovies, which the city dwellers ate and used as money. Soon, Caral had become a bustling trading center. Many of those living in the jungles and



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Did he live in Caral? The features of this clay figurine are based on the finds made at Caral by Peruvian archaeologist Ruth Shady (right) and her colleagues.

rainforests migrated to the city, especially after hundreds of miles of roads were built linking the two areas.

All this activity required a complex government network. From the central office in the plaza, officials and priests directed the affairs of the city and the religious rituals and kept the peace. Shady believes that it was irrigation that promoted Caral's growth into the first city in the Western Hemisphere.

SO, WHAT'S MISSING?

Yet, even after an intensive search, Shady did not find what she knew existed in other ancient cities—pieces of ceramics and evidence of warfare.

Analysis of the finds made thus far suggest that Caral is the oldest and most developed civilization whose inhabitants never glazed and fired the clay under their feet. They did fashion clay figurines, but did not bake them. They portray men with their hair woven into a topknot and wearing loincloths. The women wore long dresses and shell necklaces and arranged coils of hair on their cheeks. Unlike societies that stored and cooked food in ceramic pots, the people of Caral used hollowed gourds or rocks as pans and roasted their food.

Until Caral was discovered, archaeologists believed that early people



had gathered into cities for protection from their enemies. But this ancient site suggests otherwise. It contains no weapons, fortifications, prisons, or tortured bodies. During the 1,000 years it existed, the people in this ancient city never fought a war. For this reason, according to Shady, “Caral changes all our current thinking about the origins of civilization.”

A former teacher who enjoyed teaching archaeology to seventh graders, Cynthia Levinson lives in Austin, Texas, and Boston, Massachusetts.



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