**Background:** The Inca were a people that lived in the Andes (AN•deez) Mountains of South America. They had elaborate religious rituals that have left behind mummies. Most Incan mummies have been preserved in dry lowlands. But some, believed to be human sacrifices, have been found frozen on high mountain peaks. This account describes a 1995 expedition to Peru by the anthropologist Johan Reinhard (shown above). He was accompanied by his climbing partner, Miguel Zárate.
September 6

During our first ascent of Ampato\(^1\) on September 6, we made our way up the northern slope. We thought this would be a fairly simple route, but, as we neared the top, ice pinnacles blocked our way. They had been formed by erosion caused by the sun and wind.

We had to break through a mile of ice pinnacles to reach one of the lower summits at 20,400 feet. Much to our surprise, just as we were about to reach it, we saw a long layer of grass encased in the ice. We were puzzled. How did so much grass get here? Grass could not grow at this altitude!

We climbed the rest of the way to the summit and found that it was rounded and covered with grass, the “grass site.” Pieces of Inca pottery and textiles, rope, chunks of wood, and even leather and wool sandals were scattered about. Flat slabs of rock had been carried from over a thousand feet below to make flooring. One slab still had a rope around it. The rock floor had been covered with thick layers of grass, to make a resting place...

September 7

The next day, using a different route along a ridge, we moved our tent up to a small plateau at 19,200 feet. There we found the remains of several Inca ruins, including wooden poles that could have been used to make large tents. After setting up our own tent, we searched for the route the Incas had used to the top. We found grass and pieces of wood that had been placed onto the steeper sections of the slope to help make a trail to the summit.

September 8

The next morning we crossed over the “grass site” at 20,400 feet and made our way through and around ice pinnacles inside Ampato’s crater until we were about 200 feet below the summit...

[O]n the summit ridge, we saw stones that had formed a corner of a building. Most of the structure had fallen down one of two naturally formed gullies that dropped 200 feet to the inside of the crater. From the ridge we could not see where these led. So I wrapped two stones in yellow plastic that I had carried in case we needed to mark our way. I threw a stone down each of the gullies, thinking “It’ll be a miracle if we ever see them again.”

We then climbed down off the ridge and scrambled our way around beneath it. We soon spotted yellow plastic below us where the rocky slope met the ice pinnacles where we had been climbing to the summit only a few hours before.

**REVIEW** Why did they throw stones wrapped in yellow plastic down the gullies?

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1. **Ampato**: an inactive volcano in Peru.
A little farther we saw what looked to us like a mummy bundle lying on the ice. It seemed so unlikely to find a mummy out in the open, we literally couldn't believe our eyes. Miguel said, “Maybe it’s a climber’s backpack.” Only half joking, I replied, “Maybe it’s a climber.”

As we drew closer, I knew from the stripes on the cloth that it was probably a mummy bundle. This would mean only one thing: The Incas had performed a human sacrifice on the ridge top. The bundle containing the victim had been buried in the structure that had collapsed when part of the summit ridge crashed into the crater.

I knew that even a partially frozen body would be invaluable for science. A frozen body is like a time capsule, which allows scientists to look back into the past and find out things difficult to know otherwise—such as what foods were eaten, what diseases and bacteria existed, who was related to the mummy, where it came from, and much more.

I grew more excited as I remembered that only three frozen mummies had been recovered in all of South America.

Descending towards it, we found fragments of a torn textile. A seashell, two cloth bags containing food offerings (maize kernels and a maize cob), llama bones, and pieces of Inca pottery were strewn about on the slope above the bundle.

After I photographed these items, Miguel used his ice ax to cut loose the bundle from the ice.

He turned it on its side for a better grip. Both of us were momentarily stunned as the body turned.

We looked straight into the face of a young girl. She was the first frozen female mummy found in South America!

Her dried-out features made me fear that we had arrived too late. However, the bundle weighed about 90 pounds, which meant the body was still frozen. A dried-out mummy would have weighed much less.

**REVIEW** How could they tell that the mummy was not dried out?

I wondered what to do next. If we left the mummy behind in the open, the sun and volcanic ash would cause further damage. Climbers might find her and take her and the other artifacts as souvenirs or to sell. The ground was frozen rock hard, and it was impossible to bury the mummy.
heavy snowfall could cover the summit and make recovery impossible. . . .

Thoughts rushed through my mind. It could take weeks, if not months, to get a government permit that would allow me to return and recover the mummy. Obtaining the funding to organize a scientific expedition could take even longer.

I decided that we should try to carry the mummy and the statues down the mountain. This would be difficult under the best of circumstances. Unfortunately, we were both feeling weak, and I had an upset stomach.

**REVIEW** Why did the anthropologist feel it was important to get the mummy down the mountain?

Just as I thought things couldn’t be worse, it began to snow! Then, in the darkening light, Sabancaya erupted. We’d seen the volcano erupt before, but now it looked threatening.

Brushing aside a feeling of dread, we wrapped the bundle in plastic and attached it to my backpack. We had to scramble for a mile around the ice pinnacles inside the crater to link up with the route back to camp.

This was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. My backpack was so heavy that any slip meant a hard fall, and I crashed to the ground a dozen times. I could only get back on my feet by propping myself against the ground with my ice ax and lunging upward. Every fall meant precious minutes lost.

2. **Sabancaya**: an active volcano in Peru, located very close to Ampato.