

By: [Gina White](#), Science Editor

[The Sacred Dogs of the Ancient Native Americans](#)

Hundreds found in old tombs in southwestern US

The tombs of ancient Native Americans in the modern southwestern US have been found to contain hundreds of dog remains. A new study, recently presented at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archeology in Vancouver, Canada, and representing the first results of an investigation on dog burial places encountered in the area points to the mystical role these animals had for those people. "Throughout the region, dogs have been found buried with jewelry, alongside adults and children, carefully stacked in groups, or in positions that relate to important structures. The findings suggest that the animals figured more prominently in their owners' lives than simply as pets. I'm suggesting that the dogs in the New World in the Southwest were used to escort people into the next world, and sometimes they were used in certain rituals in place of people," author Dody Fugate, an assistant curator at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, New Mexico, told National Geographic News. "I have a database now of almost 700 dog burials, and a large number of them are either buried in groups in places of ritual or they're buried with individual human beings. Many of the burials are concentrated in northwestern New Mexico and along the Arizona-New Mexico border," said Fugate. The gathered information shows that dog burials were practiced mainly between 400 B.C. and A.D. 1100. "The earlier the [human] burial, the more likely you are to have dog in it," Fugate said. However, in the 14th or 15th century, the practice ceased, evidence showed. "Indeed, today's Pueblo and Navajo Indians believe it is improper to bury dogs. What the ancient dogs looked like is an open question, but their remains suggest that they were far more diverse than was previously believed," said Fugate. The buried dogs had either floppy or pointed ears, long or curly tails, were small or tall. "There were even white ones, found buried on the Arizona-Utah border, whose fur was used to weave ritual garb," added Fugate. "Archaeologists tend to examine animal bones at excavation sites with an eye to what humans were eating, rather than what their relationships with dogs were like. Because dogs are very seldom to come across in a way that suggests they were used for food, they tend to get dismissed as being not very significant... so they tend to not be reported in very much detail. Basically [ritual dog burial] is a pattern that's found around the world" said Susan Crockford, a zooarcheologist at Canada's University of Victoria, who investigates dog breeds in the Pacific Northwest. Ancient dogs may explain many things about ancient Native Americans. "Not thinking that dogs might have had a religious relationship [with people] as well means that you're leaving out a chunk of [ancient] religion. If [you make that assumption], you are losing enormous amounts of information about the ritual context and the mindset of these people," said Fugate.