Carlos had reported that the summit ridge was thickly coated with ice and more than 30 feet wide. Now it was no more than three feet across. The dark gray ash had absorbed the sun’s warmth, melting the ice and snow and causing the ridge to collapse.

I stopped to take notes, and Miguel, with whom I had climbed numerous peaks in the Peruvian Andes over the years, kept moving.* Then I heard a whistle and saw his ice ax raised in the air. When I reached him, he pointed to a tiny fan of reddish feathers protruding from a nearby slope. We both knew instantly that they were part of a headdress of the sort found on Inca ceremonial statuettes.

I secured Miguel with a rope, and he extracted from the steep incline first one, then two more, Inca statuettes with feather headdresses. Classic Inca figurines made of gold, silver, and rare spondylus shell, they had been buried facing the highest point of Ampato’s summit. They wore colorful textiles that looked as good as new. The feather tips that had caught our attention were also nearly perfect, so they must have been exposed only briefly to the elements.

We looked around and saw, perched at the head of two gullies, large stones that formed a corner of what had once been a walled structure—likely an Inca ceremonial platform. The gullies dropped out of sight to a maze of ice pinacles in the crater about 200 feet below. Wondering where the rest of the structure and any other falling objects might have landed, I wrapped two rocks in yellow plastic and tossed them down the gullies.

We climbed off the ridge and, just where the slope met the pinacles, saw one of the rocks. Not far beyond it, on an icy outcrop, was what appeared to be the cloth bundle of a mummy.

This seemed so unlikely that Miguel said, “Maybe it’s a climber’s backpack.” As we drew closer, we saw that the object, wrapped tightly in textiles, was indeed an Inca mummy. I felt a jolt of excitement. In 15 years I’d climbed more than a hundred peaks in the Andes and conducted various high-altitude archaeological excavations, but not once seen a mummy bundle like this on a mountain.

Near the mummy, strewn about on the ice, were pieces of cloth, a miniature female figurine made of spondylus shell, llama bones, sherds of pottery, and two cloth bags containing corn kernels and a corn cob. After I’d photographed these objects, Miguel used his ax to free the mummy from its icy pedestal. He turned it on its side for a better grip, and we found ourselves looking into the face of an Inca girl.

Only a very few frozen mummies have been found anywhere in the Andes—and none is a female. This girl, in her early teens, must have been ritually sacrificed and buried on the summit of Ampato. Sometime after 1995, when the summit ridge began disintegrating, ice and rock slid downslope, taking with it the mummy and her tomb. The tomb broke up and was lost, leaving only the remnant of the summit platform.

The impact of the mummy’s fall tore off one of her outer