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Talking with the dead from southern Mexico: Tracing bioarchaeological foundations and new perspectives in Oaxaca

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, bioarchaeological research has emerged as one of the principal tools for studying diverse aspects of ancient society through the analysis of human remains. Oaxaca, Mexico is a culturally diverse region of Mesoamerica that today boasts at least sixteen discrete ethnolinguistic groups. Bioarchaeology in Oaxaca has traditionally focused on the Late Formative and Classic period (500 BCE–800 CE) Zapotec city of Monte Albán, and on its hinterland. Largely descriptive, these studies provided basic discussions of health, nutrition, and funerary offerings. Beyond the Valley of Oaxaca, much less comprehensive bioarchaeological research has been undertaken to date. Never before have data from the study of human remains in multiple geographical regions and time periods within Oaxaca been assembled in a single venue. The goal of this collection of papers is to bring together the results of bioarchaeological scholarship on diverse topics, time periods, and regions. These studies investigate approximately 3500 years of precolumbian history, from the beginnings of the Early Formative (ca. 1650 BCE) to the Colonial period. The papers discuss five major geographical areas and consider various cultural groups including the Zapotec, Mixtec, Chontal, and Chatino peoples. This special issue is the first academic product of which we are aware to provide such a concentrated yet diverse consideration of the social context and bioarchaeological significance of ancient human remains from Oaxaca.

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1. Introduction

Mexico's southern state of Oaxaca has captured the interest of travelers and scholars both within Mexico and internationally (Fig. 1). The mountainous region's natural biodiversity is well matched by its cultural diversity, which is today demonstrated by the presence of at least sixteen discrete ethnolinguistic groups among its considerable indigenous population (e.g., Bartolomé and Barabas, 1996; Joyce, 2010; Monaghan, 1995; Stephen, 2005). Despite this rich cultural heritage, the region has not received the same intensity of study as have other areas of Mesoamerica. Much Oaxacanist research to date has focused on the Zapotecs, whose ancestors have occupied the Valley of Oaxaca for thousands of years, and to a lesser extent on Mixtec groups from surrounding highland regions (e.g., Acosta and Romero, 1992; Spores, 1984) and the ancestral Mixtec and Chatino populations of the western Pacific Coast (e.g., Barber, 2005; Barber et al., 2013; Hepp, 2015; Joyce, 1991).

As redefined by Buikstra (1977, p. 69), bioarchaeology is the scientific study of human remains from archaeological contexts, and which includes “active participation [by] both archaeologists and physical anthropologist in all phases of research design.” Over time, this

discipline has grown to consider many aspects of social organization such as age, gender, identity, violence, ethnicity, and subsistence in a wide variety of geographical areas (Blomster, 2011; Geller, 2008; Gillespie, 2001; Rakita et al., 2005). Scholars have applied bioarchaeological approaches at multiple scalar levels, from that of individuals (osteobiographies) to that of populations. Mesoamericanist research has produced numerous bioarchaeological publications, many of which have focused on the Maya region (Cucina and Tiesler, 2005; Duncan and Schwarz, 2014; Maggiano et al., 2008; Metcalfe et al., 2009; Tiesler and Cucina, 2006), and Central Mexico (Chávez Balderas, 2010, 2007; Graulich, 2003; Joyce, 2000; López Luján and Olivier, 2010; Manzanilla, 2002; Spence and Pereira, 2007). Though researchers have attempted some cross-cultural bioarchaeological comparisons in Mesoamerica (e.g., Márquez Morfín et al., 2002), Oaxaca has not received the same level of attention paid to other areas. The goal of the present special issue is to address this relative paucity of research by considering past and ongoing bioarchaeological studies in several parts of Oaxaca.

2. Bioarchaeological foundations in Oaxaca (1930–1960)

As was true in other regions, the first bioarchaeological studies in Oaxaca were descriptive in nature. They focused on metrics,

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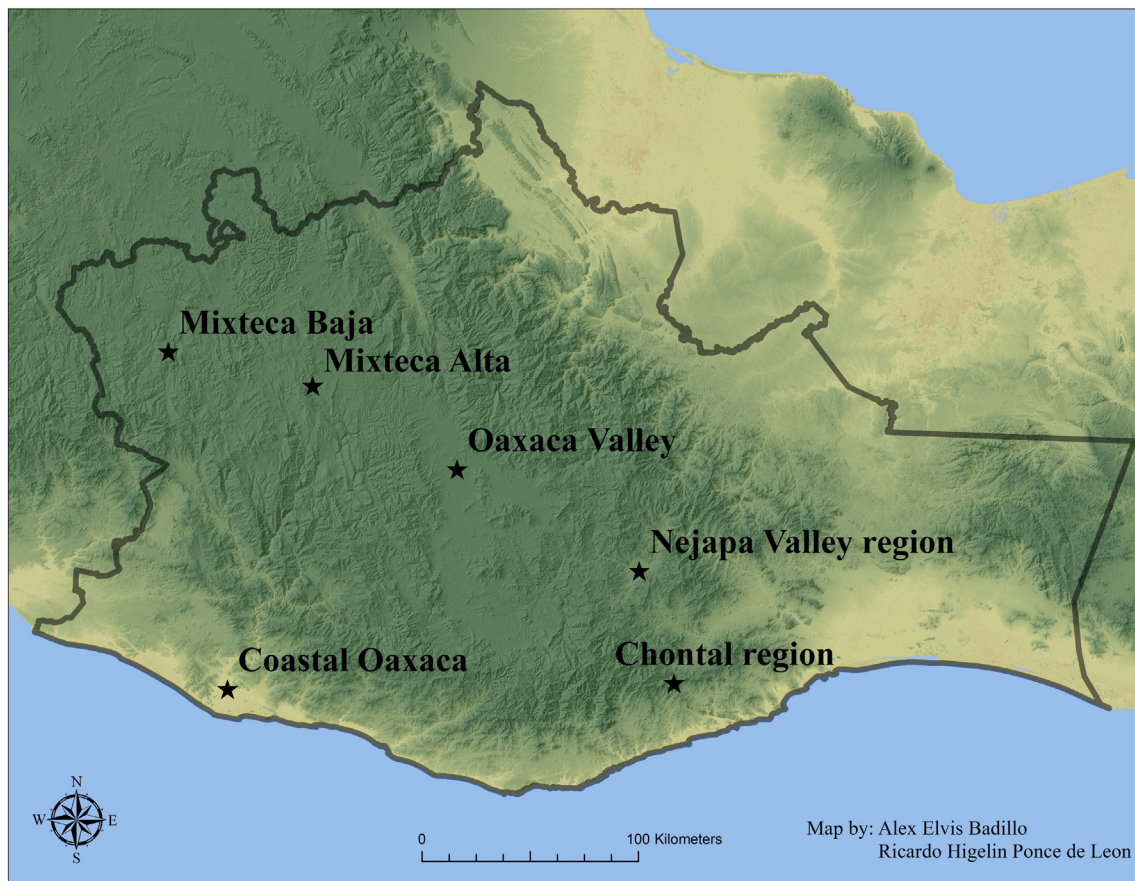


Fig. 1. Regions of Oaxaca.

morphology, and biotypologies of ancient populations as identified through osteological analysis (López Alonso et al., 1988). Some of this research was made possible by the work of Alfonso Caso, whose excavations at the ancient Zapotec city of Monte Albán began in the 1930s and resulted in Oaxaca's first significant osteological collections. Caso's work enticed Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla (a former student of Aleš Hrdlička at the Smithsonian Institution) to investigate Monte Albán's mortuary contexts. Rubín de la Borbolla, with his assistant Javier Romero, analyzed human remains from over 120 tombs and produced meticulous descriptions of sex, age, stature, and cultural modifications such as those to skulls and teeth (Caso, 1969; Romero, 1983). The most remarkable early findings came from the famous Tomb 7, the study of which saw the first use in Mexican archaeology of X-ray technology to identify Paget diseases and other paleopathologies of the skull (Caso, 1932; de la Rubín, 1969). The interdisciplinary analysis of Monte Albán's osteological collection, recovered from contexts such as Tomb 7, marked the beginning of collaborations between physical anthropologists and archaeologists in Oaxaca and in Mexico at large.

Encouraged by the findings at Monte Albán, Caso and his collaborators expanded their research to other highland sites such as Mitla. Among the most relevant early results of this research was a better understanding of taphonomy and decomposition of human remains in different settings, as well as the description of an *Omichichahuaztli*, or notched human bone used as a percussion instrument, found in Mitla's Tomb 5 (Caso and Rubín de la Borbolla, 1936). Later in his career, Caso sent an archaeological team led by Jorge Acosta and Javier Romero (who had been trained by Rubín de la Borbolla) to explore the Mixteca Alta region's Monte Negro site (Acosta and Romero, 1992). Human remains recovered from tombs at Monte Negro were notable for the variation they presented in evidence for intentional cranial and dental modifications. Osteological collections from Monte Albán and Monte

Negro permitted Romero to undertake Mesoamerica's first comparative analysis of cultural modification of human remains. In part, this work resulted in a dental modification typology, which bioarchaeologists continue to use today (Romero, 1970, 1958).

3. Bioarchaeology of Oaxaca in the era of processualism (1960–1990)

Following Caso's foundational work, major projects in the Valley of Oaxaca brought more international scholars to the region and ultimately resulted in the significant expansion of Oaxaca's osteological collections. Kent Flannery's Oaxaca Human Ecology Project (e.g., Flannery, 2009, 1986) and Blanton and Kowalewski's Valley of Oaxaca Settlement Project (e.g., Blanton, 1978; Kowalewski et al., 1989) expanded archaeological research to many new sites in the Valley of Oaxaca and recovered human remains dating from the Formative (1650 BCE–250 CE) through Postclassic (900–1521 CE) periods (see Joyce, 2010, pp. 11–12). John Paddock's (Paddock et al., 1968) intensive excavations at Lambityeco also expanded research in the Valley of Oaxaca. Lambityeco's Late Classic period occupations (approx. 600–800 CE) produced the third largest osteological collection in the Valley of Oaxaca. Denise Hodges analyzed finds from Flannery's and Paddock's projects (among others) as part of a cohesive bioarchaeological research initiative. By applying the Stress Model proposed by Goodman et al. (1984), Hodges (1987) addressed the biological strains experienced by ancient Oaxacans as they intensified their agricultural practices during the Formative, Classic, and Postclassic periods. Hodges' work helped to expand the description of human remains from traditional individual analyses to macro-scale comparative studies aimed at understanding broad trends in precolumbian Zapotec life. These studies also helped bioarchaeological research in Oaxaca to address broader

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