



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jasrep](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jasrep)

## The bioarchaeology of the Cerro de la Cruz cemetery, Oaxaca, Mexico

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 8 July 2016

Received in revised form 19 January 2017

Accepted 28 January 2017

Available online xxxx

## Keywords:

Trauma

Paleopathology

Bioarchaeology

Warfare

Mesoamerica

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses preliminary bioarchaeological findings from the Late Formative cemetery at Cerro de la Cruz in the lower Río Verde Valley on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca. The Cerro de la Cruz cemetery has figured prominently in a long-running debate over the hypothesized conquest of the region by Monte Albán. We discuss the results of detailed bioarchaeological analyses of 25 individuals from Cerro de la Cruz, including 5 from the cemetery, in the context of an ongoing regional study. Although taphonomic processes complicate the analysis, the individuals from the cemetery do not reveal evidence of traumatic injuries consistent with warfare. Instead, the range of pathological conditions visible on the bones is consistent with broader regional patterns. Although the age profile of the cemetery is clearly biased toward adults, this pattern appears to be the result of cultural selection and not death in battle. We also discuss the migration implications of a strontium isotope analysis from individuals in the cemetery. We consider the Cerro de la Cruz cemetery in relation to four cemeteries discovered in the region that span the Late Formative to the Early Classic periods.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, archaeologists in Oaxaca have debated the nature and extent of Monte Albán's impact on surrounding regions during the later Formative period from 300 BCE to 250 CE (Fig. 1). In general, two models of Monte Albán's interregional impact have been proposed. Highland researchers have proposed that Monte Albán controlled a territorial empire through military conquest and colonization extending over 20,000 km<sup>2</sup> (e.g., Balkansky, 1998; Marcus and Flannery, 1996:206–207; Redmond and Spencer, 2006:377; Spencer, 2007). In contrast, researchers working on Oaxaca's Pacific coast question the nature and extent of Monte Albán's empire (Joyce, 2003, 2014; Levine, 2013; Workinger, 2013; Workinger and Joyce, 2009; Zeitlin and Joyce, 1999). Much of the debate has centered on the interpretation of data from the lower Río Verde Valley on Oaxaca's western Pacific coast, particularly a series of human burials from the Late Formative period site of Cerro de la Cruz. In this paper, we briefly review the debate and discuss the implications of bioarchaeological findings from Cerro de la Cruz. We observe that, although taphonomic processes complicate the analysis, the individuals do not reveal evidence of traumatic injuries consistent with warfare, nor do they show increased rates of biological stress often documented in populations experiencing interpersonal conflict. From a forensic archaeology perspective, the burial configuration at Cerro de la Cruz and the trauma analysis are outside

of the parameters for a mass grave resulting from larger violent conflict (Cabo et al., 2012; Haglund et al., 2011).

## 2. Background and methods

## 2.1. Archaeology

Cerro de la Cruz is a small Late Formative site covering 1.5 ha that is located on a hill in the floodplain (Joyce, 1994; Joyce et al., 1998). Excavations exposed portions of two terraces with stone retaining walls, as well as areas of the Late Formative ground surface. Four probable low-status residences characterized by stone foundations, earthen floors, burials, and small cooking features were exposed on the different occupational surfaces. On the upper terrace, however, the excavations uncovered an architectural complex including a granite flagstone patio surrounded by the stone foundations of five structures (Structures 1 to 5; Fig. 2). A dense concentration of burials was associated with Structure 1, the easternmost building exposed on the upper terrace, and it is these burials that are the focus of debate.

The remains of 49 bodies were interred beneath the uppermost two floors and alongside the foundation walls of Structure 1 (Fig. 3; Barber et al., 2013; Joyce et al., 1998). The initial burial analysis identified 14 male and 11 females; none were interred with offerings. The absence of offerings is not surprising since Cerro de la Cruz is a modest site with few indications of status differences; only 5% of the 86 Late Formative interments recovered from the entire site were accompanied by offerings. In contrast, at the 20 ha site of Río Viejo, 80% of the buried individuals had offerings, but all were modest, the most elaborate being a snail

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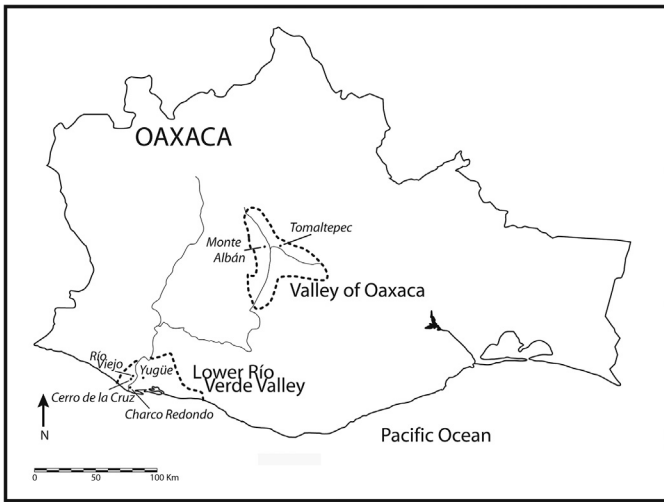


Fig. 1. Oaxaca showing regions and archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

shell necklace. In Structure 1 at Cerro de la Cruz, adults predominated, accounting for 42 (86%) of the individuals; the remaining 7 (14%) individuals were subadults. An additional 9 interments were recovered near the southwest corner of the flagstone patio and included 8 adults and one subadult. The relationship between these burials and those of Structure 1 are not clear, however. Elsewhere at Cerro de la Cruz burials exhibited a more normal age profile with infants and children predominate. We argue that the burials in Structure 1 at Cerro de la Cruz represent a communal cemetery (Joyce, 1994; Joyce et al., 1998) or mortuary domain, in that it was a culturally designated area with deliberate use and reuse over time, the placement in which was determined through social or ideological factors of the living (Wright, 2006). The cemetery represented the collective burial practices of a supradomestic social group within this community. Interment in the cemetery was restricted to individuals of a certain achieved status defined by age or unidentified life experiences accounting for the predominance of adults. A similar preponderance of adults was found at the Early Formative period cemetery at Tomaltepec in the Valley of Oaxaca (Whalen, 1981).

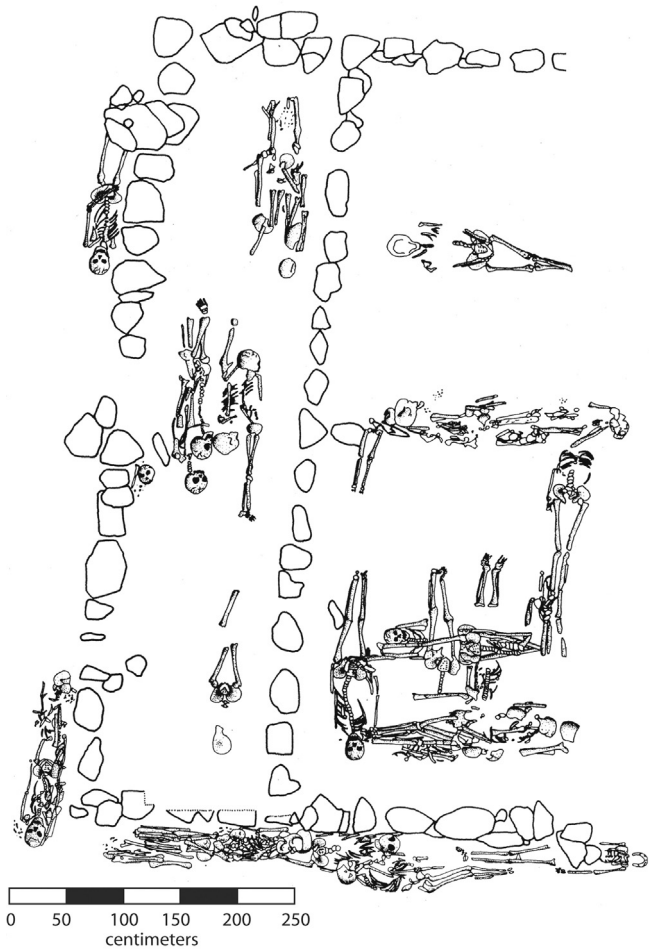


Fig. 3. The Structure 1 cemetery at Cerro de la Cruz (from Joyce, 1994: Fig. 9)

Proponents of the Monte Albán empire model offer an alternative interpretation of the Structure 1 burials. They argue that the Structure 1 burials represent the remains of a massacre and claim that the bodies

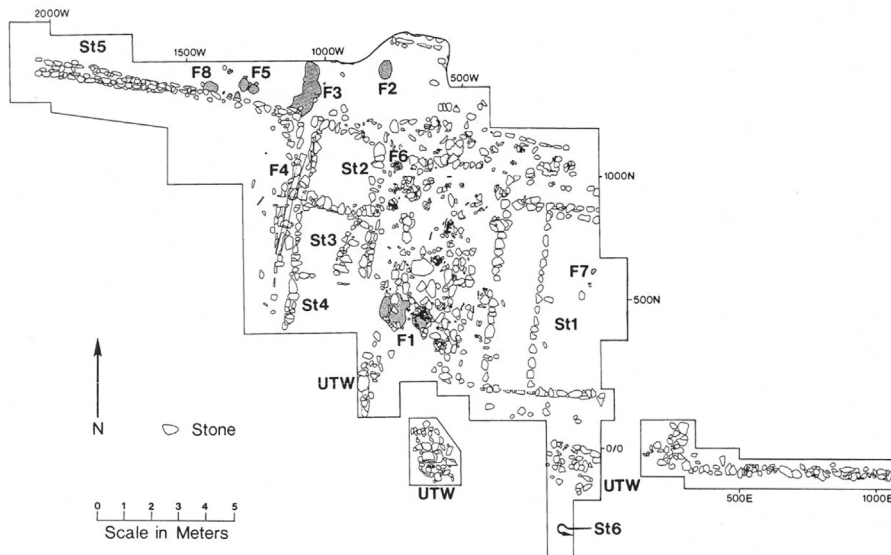


Fig. 2. The Upper Terrace at Cerro de la Cruz: St = structure; F = feature; UTW = upper terrace retaining wall (from Joyce, 1991: Fig. 5.2).

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