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## Knowing the dead in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca: Yucuita phase burials at Etlatongo

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## ABSTRACT

We explore burials from the first of a series of Mixtec households at Etlatongo, Oaxaca, Mexico, that appear to have been located in the same space for several generations, shifting both horizontally and vertically through time. These burials, dating from between 500 and 300 BCE (the later part of the Middle Formative period) represent a variety of positions, including extended and seated, as well as placements, from features dug below the house to features placed directly on the house floor. The health of these individuals was generally robust, with the exception of dental attrition and caries. The presence of corporeal modification, in the form of cranial manipulation, is also evinced from the Etlatongo sample. Exploring the placements of these burials, it is possible to reconstruct the sequence in which they were interred. We argue that parallel burials placed on the house floor belonged to the founders of this household. Upon their death and interment, the house was terminated and occupation shifted. Prior to this space being filled in, however, a shaft was built that provided access, both physical and spiritual, to one of the burials. Successive generations lived on their ancestors, who played an important foundational role in establishing this lineage or House.

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## 1. Introduction

The body and by extension the house, as the locus of bodily and daily practice, is both a medium and arena of social process and political change (Bourdieu, 1977). Combining analyses of both the setting and space of human burials with bioarchaeology and osteology from Etlatongo, in the Mixteca Alta of Oaxaca, Mexico illuminates the social context and significance of mortuary practices during the Yucuita phase from 500 to 300 BCE, the later part of the Middle Formative period. By focusing on a series of burials and a later, related feature, all of which are connected by their archaeological contexts to different occupations or generations of the same late Middle Formative household, our research intervenes in exploring larger social phenomena, from the foundational role of ancestors in households and lineages, as well as the impact of human mortuary modification and inscription on the landscape. We provide archaeological data from the 1992 excavations as well as detailed biometric analyses of the human remains conducted in 2016.

We analyze the placement of four burials associated with the same Yucuita phase lineage or “House” at Etlatongo, located in the Nochixtlán Valley of the Mixteca Alta (Fig. 1). Several related terms are deployed during our analysis. Stone walls represent the physical remains of an architectural house, while we use household to include both the physical elements (encompassing features beyond the architecture of the house)

as well as the synchronic social group of individuals who live together and are connected through economic and other quotidian and non-quotidian activities, similar to Hendon's (2002:77) definition of a Tzotzil Maya household. For diachronic connections between a series of synchronic households, we alternate between lineage, a problematic concept in the absence of DNA or other evidence that proves blood relationship between individuals, and House in the Levi-Strauss (1982) sense. For Levi-Strauss (1982:174), a House is a corporate body constituted by both material and immaterial wealth; it occupies a location, reproduces itself and forges social memory through the transmission of goods, titles, structures, land, etc. (see also Chance, 2000; Hodder and Cessford, 2004; Joyce, 2000). Members of a House may be related by blood, or may reckon kin-like relationships from distant, possibly fictive, ancestors or through long-term proximity. While kinship may be part of a House, locality and production are essential variables (Chance, 2000).

The House that is the focus of our analyses at Etlatongo appears to have been located in the same space for several generations of households, shifting slightly both horizontally and vertically through time. The burials that provide our bioarchaeological data are associated with the first household (Occupation 1), and they represent a variety of burial positions, including extended and seated, as well as locations of placement, from features dug below the house to features placed directly on the house floor. Exploring the placements of these burials, it is possible to reconstruct the sequence in which they were interred. We argue a foundational experience was the placement of parallel burials on the house floor, effectively leading to its abandonment; successive

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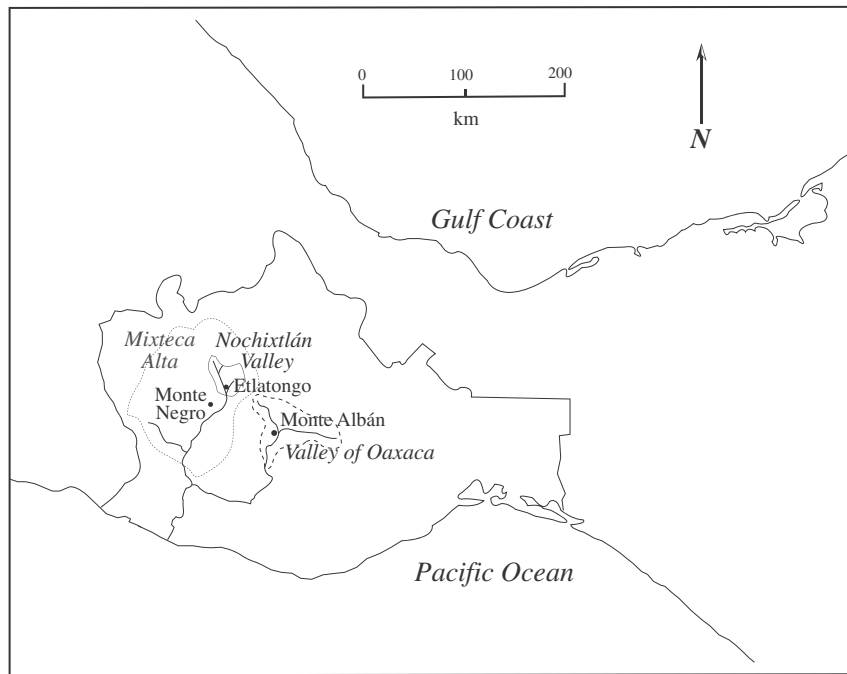


Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Etlatongo in the Nochixtlán Valley, Oaxaca, Mexico, as well as other sites mentioned in the text.

generations lived above these ancestors from Occupation 1, connected to them both physically and spiritually by a special stone cylindrical chamber. We suggest that the interment of bodies was not just a way of disposing of the dead but actually made and reproduced the House.

We situate our research in a larger anthropological literature that focuses on bodies as well as how death and mortuary ritual affect social life and the negotiation of social roles (Bourdieu, 1977; Butler, 1993; Douglas, 1970; Fowler, 2004; Joyce, 1998; McAnany, 1995; Scheper-Huges and Lock, 1987; Van Wolputte, 2004). We view the physical body, as well as its constituent parts, as a site of representation and identity by different social agents, living and dead. Social meaning is inscribed on the body, which has led to it being referring to it as text, something that is performed. In thinking of bodies as social constructs, there are also issues about what bodies represent, and what body parts signify – the relationship between bodies, personhood and identities. Chris Fowler (2004:9) contrasts individuality with dividuality, whereby a person is composite and multi-authored. These concepts are not mutually exclusive; there is a tension between individual and dividual in all persons (ibid.:36).

At the Formative Maya site of K'axob, ancestral bodies have been interpreted as legitimizing claims to land and inheritance through a “genealogy of place” (McAnany, 1995). The burials of family members within the residential compound sanctified and legitimized the family's holdings. Burials mark spaces in the landscape, and in the case of certain ancestors, become sites both of veneration and claiming resources. We argue that burials were critical in creating, sustaining and reproducing a household as well as inscribing lineage and House into the Mixtec landscape. The Etlatongo burials manifest connections between bodies, ancestors, and houses.

## 2. Methodology, terminology, and nature of the sample

This study focuses on four Yucuita phase burials from the 1992 excavations at Etlatongo. The association of these burials with the Yucuita phase comes from both stylistic dating of ceramics, including numerous complete vessels, and chronometric dating (see Blomster, 2004, 2015). Occurring towards the end of the Middle Formative, the Yucuita phase is contemporaneous with the rise of early urban centers throughout

Oaxaca state, such as Monte Albán. At Etlatongo, the Yucuita phase is characterized by a marked expansion of the boundaries of the site, as it covers much of the earlier part of the site while also colonizing a nearby hill, forming one large, continuous occupation.

Several distinctions between burial types have been established by the various Etlatongo projects. We distinguish secondary from primary burials in that secondary burials have been taken from their original primary burial context; secondary burials may represent an attempt at the reburial of an individual from somewhere else at the site or could be included as offerings with a primary burial. We further distinguish a secondary burial from “Isolated Human Remains” (IHR), which include scattered human bones that occur in contexts such as middens, burials (potentially as offerings), or often redeposited in fill deposits; we reserve the term “secondary burial” for bones that were documented in the field as grouped together, sometimes with articulation of bones.

The human remains from the 1992 burials were reanalyzed in 2016; the results summarized here supersede previous reports of these osteological data (Blomster, 2004, 2011, 2015). The 2016 analysis was initiated by estimating sex, age, and minimum number of individuals (MNI). The MNI was achieved by counting the minimum number of elements in each burial, regardless of whether the individual was primary, secondary, or IHR. Thus, these four burials contain fragments of at least eleven individuals (see Table 1). Of these eleven individuals, six are considered primary and five secondary or IHR, possibly included unintentionally in the fill used to cover primary burials or as offerings with the primary burials. After MNI was established, the focus turned to all the osteological features that each burial could present, such as paleopathologies, trauma, stature, taphonomic decomposition and cultural bone modification. All the analyses were recorded and scored according to the methods addressed in the *Standards* (Buikstra and Ubelaker, 1994). In the case of paleopathologies, additional sources were consulted to corroborate the possible infections and skeletal lesions (Mays, 2008; Ortner, 2003, 2008; Stuart-Macadam, 1992).

## 3. The Etlatongo burials

Excavation Area 1 at Etlatongo, or EA-1, exposed an area of 14 m<sup>2</sup>, including fragments of three successive Yucuita phase households. The

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