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Collective memory in San Sebastián Etla, Oaxaca: Bioarchaeological approaches to an Early Formative period (1400–1200 BCE) mortuary space

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ABSTRACT

Mortuary contexts with multiple interments are among the many variations on pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican burial practices. Ancient societies in Oaxaca, Mexico are well known for burying their dead in both single and multiple graves. Tombs have long been interpreted as reflecting the elevated social status of the people buried within them. Multiple burials may also reflect variations in social identity, particularly when identifiable clusters of graves demonstrate variability. Such clusters may reveal variation according to gender, age, ethnicity, and/or social class. In this paper, we apply a bioarchaeological approach to the discussion of 42 sets of human remains in 41 Early Formative period (1400–1200 BCE) burial features from San Sebastián Etla in the Valley of Oaxaca. We contend that clusters of burials identified within this mortuary context reflect aspects of ancient identity and collective memory for those who produced and were interred at the site. Based on the spatial distribution of these burials, their depositional context and orientation, and the minimum number of individuals (MNI) identified at the site, the San Sebastián Etla mortuary context may represent a formal cemetery. If so, it would be among the oldest cemeteries not only in highland Oaxaca but also in all of Mesoamerica.

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1. Introduction

In 2012, a research team from the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH), working with the Archaeology Section of the *Centro INAH Oaxaca*, conducted an exploratory rescue project in the town of San Sebastián Etla. This small modern community is located in the municipality of San Pablo Etla, approximately 15 km north of Oaxaca city and 1.7 km east of the archaeological site of San José Mogote (Fig. 1). Excavations associated with this project uncovered a single primary burial likely dating to the late Monte Albán period, as well as 40 sets of remains associated with Early Formative period (1400–1200 BCE) archaeological materials, and which became the primary focus of the research presented here. This finding is particularly unique for the large number of individuals dating to the Early Formative, and who were interred in an area of approximately 36 m². Our studies proceeded according to two main research questions: why were the 40 individuals deposited in a single funerary space? Furthermore, what relationships existed between those buried individuals? In this paper, we discuss the background of our study as it relates to mortuary practice in Early Formative period Oaxaca, particularly during the Tierras Largas phase

(1400–1200 BCE). We also present the results of our bioarchaeological analyses of these remains and propose that the mortuary context in question reflects aspects of social memory for the ancient Oaxacans who buried their dead at the site.

1.1. The Etla region during the Tierras Largas phase (1400–1200 BCE)

The study area considered here is located in the Etla arm of the Valley of Oaxaca. Located northwest of the valley's other two arms, this is the narrowest portion of the Valley of Oaxaca, as well as that most immediately surrounded by steep mountains. Through the Etla arm flows the Atoyac River, which favors the surrounding area with fertile alluvium and abundant moisture (known in Zapotec as *yuh kohp*). Thanks to these conditions, Etla was among the first regions in Oaxaca's central valley to support sedentary village farming during the Early Formative period. For millennia, farmers in the region have grown maize, squash, and beans. The region is also home to wild varieties of agave, prickly pear, black walnut, and various acacias. The region supports populations of deer, peccary, rabbits, and birds, all of which were exploited by ancient human inhabitants of the region (Marcus and Flannery, 1996:82–83). Based on archaeological surveys of Oaxaca's central valleys performed during the 1970s and 80s, the Etla arm supported at least 17 permanent human settlements during the Tierras Largas phase (Kowalewski et al., 1989). These results suggest that Etla

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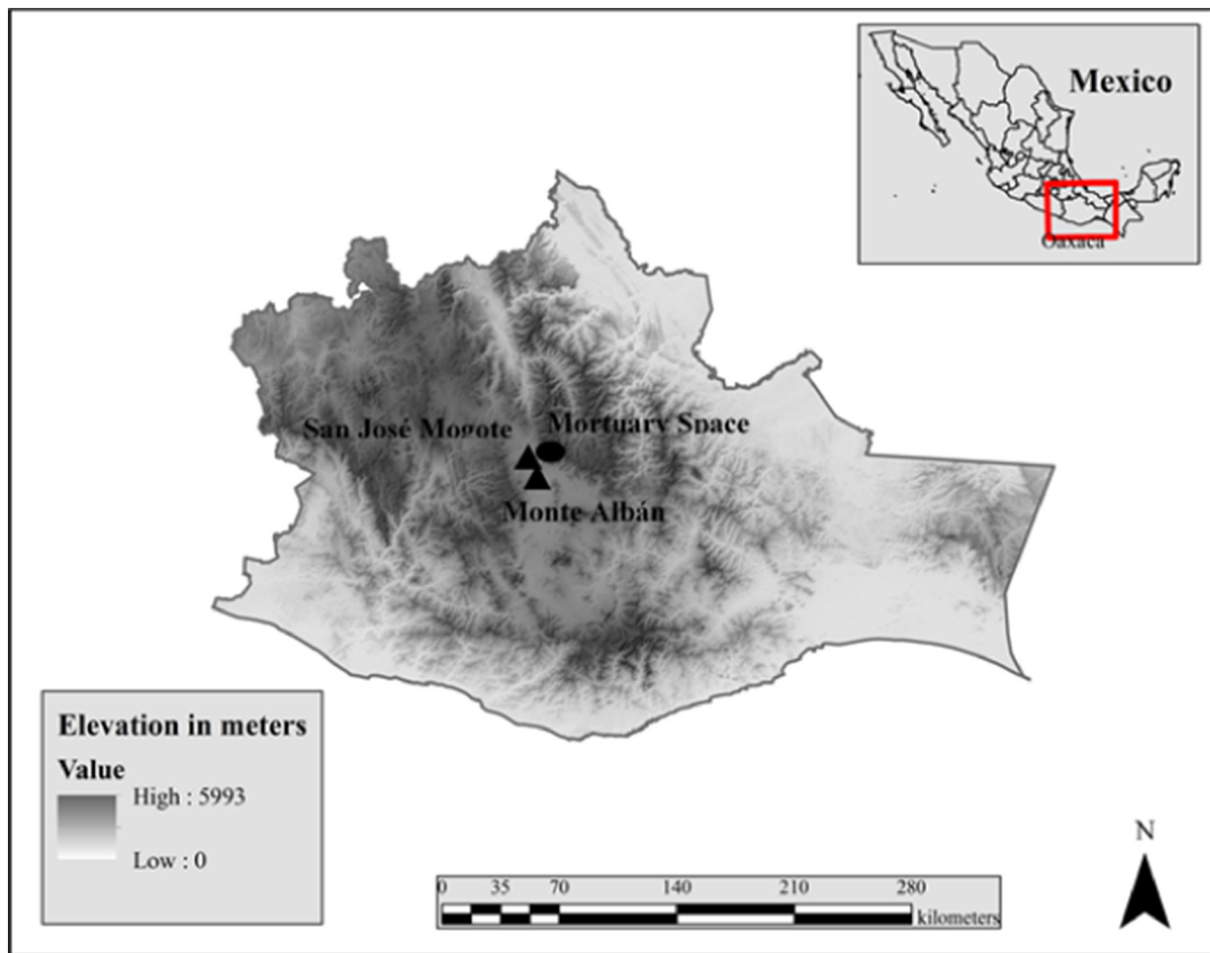


Fig. 1. Location of the Mortuary Space Excavated at San Sebastián Etla, Oaxaca.

was the most heavily occupied portion of the Valley of Oaxaca during that time. The population was distributed in hamlets, most of which were relatively small (less than 3 ha), and which contained between about three and ten houses each. The site of San José Mogote was an exception to this pattern. This site was roughly 7.8 ha in size and contained a scattered arrangement of at least ten residential areas. Houses at Early Formative period San José Mogote were constructed of wattle and daub, with roofs supported by wooden posts and floors of rammed earth (Flannery and Marcus, 2005; Joyce, 2010, pp. 80–81). These homes were associated with patios and bell-shaped storage pits. Human burials were often located near or even under the homes, and also occupied repurposed storage pits (Wiesheu, 2014, p. 412). Tierras Largas phase San José Mogote was also significant for its apparent public spaces, as exemplified by Structure 6 (E6), which measured 4.4×5.4 m in size. This structure was oriented north-south, and was built using reeds and pine poles. Structure 6 was situated atop a raised earthen platform, had a stucco floor, and also bore a stucco slurry applied to the walls. Numerous archaeologists, including Wiesheu (1996, p. 104) have inferred that “according to the traits associated with E6, it is probable that we can discuss ceremonial functions for this building. Flannery and Marcus (2003, p. 43) argued that the differences between the spatial distributions identified at San José Mogote, as compared to those of other Tierras Largas phase settlements in the Etla subvalley, suggest that the site was emerging as a regional governing center during this time. In contrast, Wiesheu (1996, p. 104) argued that the number of levels in the settlement hierarchy, and the lack of differentiation in public structures, rather point to the existence of an egalitarian society of the tribal type for this phase.” Though we leave this debate over San José Mogote’s regional significance for future discussions, it is clear

that social organization was becoming more complex during the Tierras Largas phase, as our discussion of contemporaneous mortuary deposits will demonstrate.

Archaeologists have characterized Tierras Largas phase mortuary practices as typically including primary or secondary (the latter of which is most common) burials deposited in reused bell-shaped maize storage pits (Winter, 1972, pp. 208–209. e.g., Ceja Moreno et al., 1998, pp. 283–313). These burials contained the remains of adults of both sexes, and their deposition in disused storage pits meant that they were closely associated with domestic contexts. Offerings with these burials were simple, and sometimes included one or two ceramic pots, as well as green stone or seashells (Winter, 1986, p. 333). An example of this pattern can be seen in the “LTL-1” house at the site of Tierras Largas, where an individual was interred in a primary burial at the west entrance to a domestic courtyard, while two other individuals were buried in two nearby disused storage pits (Marcus and Flannery, 1996, p. 84). In addition to burials under houses or in storage pits, Early Formative period mortuary practices in highland Oaxaca also included the use of cemeteries. For instance numerous individuals were interred in a cemetery at San José phase (1200–900 BCE) Santo Domingo Tomaltepec (Whalen, 1981). Though the Tomaltepec cemetery post-dates the one on which we focus in this paper, both contexts exhibit diverse patterns of body positioning and a mixture of primary and secondary burials.

1.2. Mortuary space at San Sebastián Etla

The mortuary space we considered for this study contained the remains of 42 individuals deposited in 41 discrete burial features in an

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