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Differences in the classic period mortuary treatment of adults and children in the valley of Oaxaca

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ABSTRACT

In size and architectural monumentality, Monte Albán dominated the Valley of Oaxaca during the Classic period (ca. 50–850 CE). The magnificent mortuary offerings, including painted tomb murals, of this period have been the focus of research into Zapotec mortuary practices across the Valley of Oaxaca, although burial contexts from this period also have been studied at other settlements. Despite this research, the remains of human children and their burial contexts have been largely ignored. Our main goal is to characterize, compare, and contrast the Classic-period mortuary practices for Zapotec children with those for adults. A previous hypothesis based on evidence from Teotihuacán and Monte Albán asserted that children in Mesoamerica were buried differently than adults. Although such differences may have been practiced at large urban centers, we endeavor to examine whether similar distinctions are evidenced at Classic period secondary sites in the Valley of Oaxaca. Our research tests this question in respect to mortuary practices through the analysis of 175 individuals, excavated in 15 different households from five archaeological sites, Atzompa, Lambityeco, the Mitla Fortress, El Palmillo, and Ejutla, all large, secondary settlements during the Classic period.

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1. Introduction

Mortuary treatment and practices have largely been studied from an archaeological context focused on adults. This practice neglects the broader perspective that can be gained by considering children or non-adults, who may or may not receive treatments similar to adults. In Mesoamerica, bioarchaeological studies focused on children have been conducted, but mostly to address how the sacrifice of children was practiced in this prehispanic world (Ardren, 2011; Crandall and Thompson, 2014). To address this gap, we adopt a bioarchaeological approach to examine the burial treatment of children among the ancient Zapotec of the Valley of Oaxaca.

In the Mesoamerican region of Oaxaca, most child burials have been described as part of offerings (Martínez López et al., 1996; Martínez López et al., 2014) or simply listed as present in larger burial populations (Wilkinson and Norelli, 1981:747). Scholars who focus on children have emphasized that the mortuary practices for these individuals differ from those of adults and have suggested that adults were buried in pits while infants and children were buried inside ceramic vessels (Martínez López et al., 1996:239). In 1974, Romano addressed the existence of different mortuary treatments for adults and children across prehispanic Mesoamerica, including Oaxaca, and noted that infants were often buried in flexed position (Romano, 1974). However, none of these previous studies offered a detailed discussion of what the different types of mortuary treatments for children were in relation to adults, nor have they focused on specific time periods to understand how and why different mortuary treatments were practiced. We suspect that if any differences in the burial treatment of children versus adults are to be documented adequately, and ultimately explained, we need to examine more finely contextualized mortuary samples. In this article we focus on child and infant burials from the Classic period (ca. 250–850 CE) Valley of Oaxaca to explore the treatment of the Zapotec children after death. In addition,

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we aim to contribute another perspective on child mortuary treatment by illustrating that prehispanic Mesoamerican children were not only offered or sacrificed but also buried in ancient Oaxaca, and their burial treatment has relevance just as the treatment of adults does.

To begin we question whether children and adults were treated differently at death in the Valley of Oaxaca during the Classic period (ca. 250–850 CE), and, if so, what were these differences. In this analysis we compare the locations of burials for children and adults. The study includes data for 175 individuals, from 15 households, at five different archaeological sites situated across the Valley of Oaxaca. We chronologically divided these data to compare Early Classic (ca. 250–500 CE) and Late Classic (ca. 500–850 CE) period mortuary practices.

1.1. The valley of Oaxaca

The Valley of Oaxaca has been extensively studied from different archaeological and theoretical perspectives since the end of the 19th century (Caso, 1932; Feinman, 2007; Feinman and Nicholas, 2016; Flannery and Marcus, 1976; Kowalewski, 2003; Marcus and Flannery, 1996; Robles García, 2001; Saville, 1899; Winter, 1989). The Valley of Oaxaca has three main arms, Tlacolula to the east, Etla to the north, and the Valle Grande and Ejutla Valley to the south. During the Classic period, Monte Albán was the main regional capital. During most of the Classic period, architectural styles, religious practices, political organization, and economic networks were shared across the valley. The rulers at Monte Albán dominated the region for approximately 1300 years until the end of the Classic period (850 CE).

Beyond Monte Albán, most of the Classic period population in the region resided in terraced hilltop towns (Kowalewski et al., 2006), at which intracommunity cooperation/interdependence has been documented and clearly was essential for community longevity (Feinman

and Nicholas, 2012). The inhabitants of secondary settlements across the Valley not only grew crops but also engaged in a diversity of craft activities. We draw our mortuary sample from five sites, three located in upland locations with terraces, Atzompa, the Mitla Fortress, and El Palmillo, and two in alluvial locales, Lambityeco and Ejutla (Fig. 1).

2. Materials

The burials we studied come from prehispanic houses and associated spaces at five archaeological sites: Atzompa in the center of the Valley of Oaxaca; Lambityeco, the Mitla Fortress, and El Palmillo in the eastern arm; and Ejutla in the southern arm.

2.1. Atzompa

The archaeological site of Atzompa is located 4 km north of Monte Albán. Based on ceramic chronology, the ancient population of Atzompa was settled in terraces during the Late Classic (ca. 500–850 CE). However, based on recently calibrated dates, Atzompa may have been occupied even earlier (400–600 CE). Excavations directed by Nelly Robles García have been ongoing since 2007. The preliminary findings include an elite residence, Casa de los Altares, which is situated at the top of the mountain. The residence includes a pottery kiln, one of only a few found in prehispanic contexts in the Valley of Oaxaca (Robles García and Vera, 2014).

The Casa de los Altares is a residential unit that illustrates elite households at Atzompa. Another domestic unit, referred to as Campamento, was situated lower down the hill, about 300 m from the ceremonial center. It contrasts with the Casa de los Altares, which is at the heart of the ceremonial center. Although the house from Campamento is more elaborate than most houses in other parts of

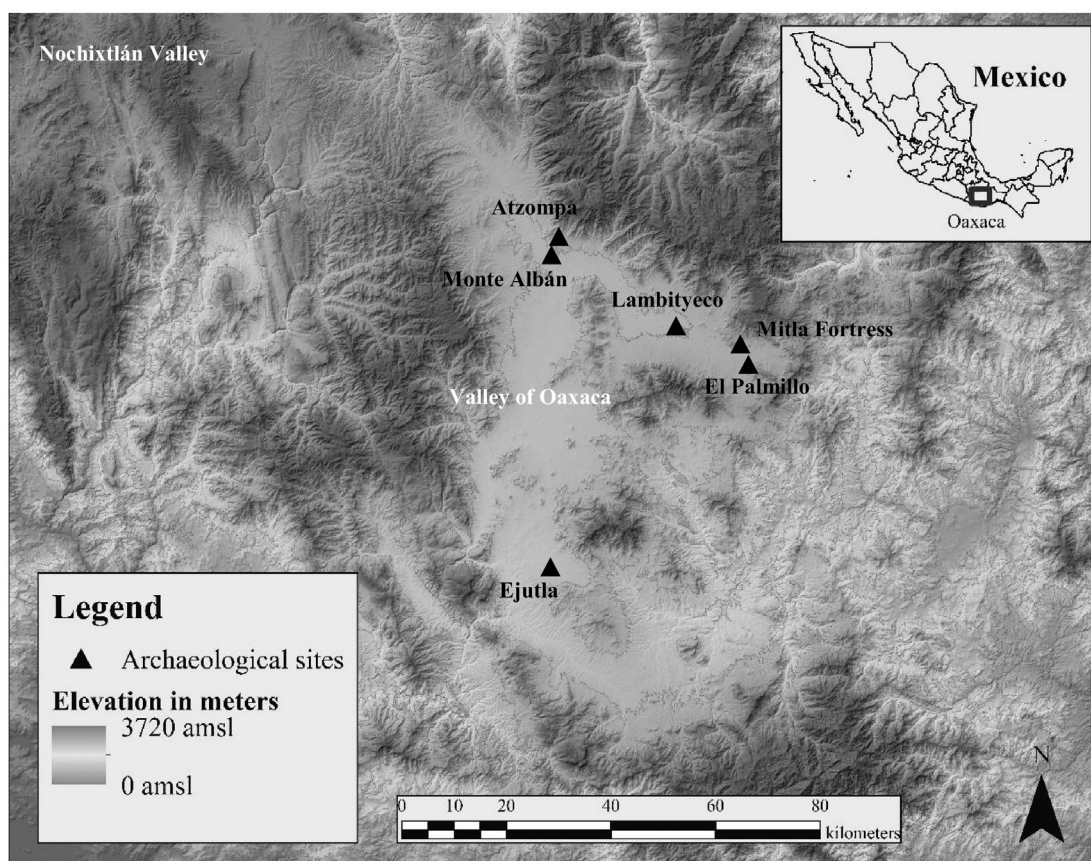


Fig. 1. Location of the archaeological sites included in this sample. Monte Albán is used as reference.

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