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Postclassic and Early Colonial mortuary practices in the Nejapa region of Oaxaca, Southern Mexico

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ABSTRACT

To date, we have documented or recovered the remains of over 15 individuals in the Nejapa region of Oaxaca. This paper summarizes these finds and takes a first step in comparing the mortuary practices of Nejapa to those in other regions of Oaxaca. Eight individuals were found buried nearby one another at the site of Majaltepec, an early Colonial period town in the mountains surrounding Nejapa. Morphoscopic dental analyses indicate the presence of at least 4 younger individuals between 15 and 21 years old, 3 infants, and 1 individual of undetermined age. Though poorly preserved, the burials provide us clear examples of Early Colonial indigenous mortuary practices. Notably, residents of Majaltepec buried their dead below floors of houses with grave offerings, similar to practices in Prehispanic Oaxaca. The persistence of these practices alongside the presence of Catholicism and Dominican clergy suggests that there were limits to Spanish oversight. Prehispanic burials in Nejapa, by comparison, are uncommon in spite of extensive excavation. The lack of sub-floor burial in Nejapa might signal a difference in identity between the Prehispanic residents of Nejapa and the residents of Majaltepec in the late sixteenth century.

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on all of the human remains and mortuary architecture found as part of the Nejapa Tavela Archaeological Project (Proyecto Arqueológico Nejapa Tavela or PANT) between 2009 and 2013 (King, 2010; King et al., 2012; King et al., n.d.). Since inception, the primary goal of the PANT research has been to determine the impact of conquest and colonialism along an important trade corridor connecting the highland Valley of Oaxaca to the coastal Isthmus of Tehuantepec. To date, we have completed nearly 200 km² of systematic archaeological survey spanning valley floors, piedmont, and high mountain ridgetops, and have excavated 165 m² at archaeological sites in five different municipalities (Fig. 1). The excavations include 1 × 1 and/or 2 × 2 m test units at 13 sites, as well as horizontal excavations of residential architecture in two valley floor sites.

The human remains that we have located over the course of this project include simple burials of single or multiple individuals in three different sites, two examples of infant burials in ceramic vessels, five possible tombs (none of which have been excavated), and various examples of isolated human bones or teeth eroding out in sites located on survey or collected during test pit excavations (Table 1).

In addition, we have heard dozens of oral accounts from local residents testifying about having found human skeletal remains on their land. Sometimes these finds took place decades ago. Nearly all of these burials are now destroyed due to construction, agriculture, looting, or erosion. In a few of these cases, the bones were collected by the local residents who found them, but most often they were simply discarded after discovery. These witnesses also frequently report having found grave offerings, some of which were either kept or sold to collectors.

2. Background

The Nejapa region is located in the Sierra Sur region of southeastern Oaxaca, Mexico, about at the midpoint between the Valley of Oaxaca and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The large and fertile Nejapa valley, with its rich agricultural lands, is surrounded by high mountains, reaching over 2000 m above sea level. The area served as crossroads for people who spoke different languages, including Chontal, Zapotec, and Mixe, and for merchants (including Nahuas and other indigenous peoples) who peddled goods such as obsidian, copper, and beads up and down between the highlands and the coast over a thousand years. Due to its strategic position along a major trade route, the region was heavily contested throughout its long history and was the focus of military expeditions at the hands of the Zapotecs, Aztecs, and Spanish (King, 2012). Archaeological research has revealed that the Nejapa region was most densely occupied during the Postclassic era between CE 800 and 1521, when traffic and economic exchange between the

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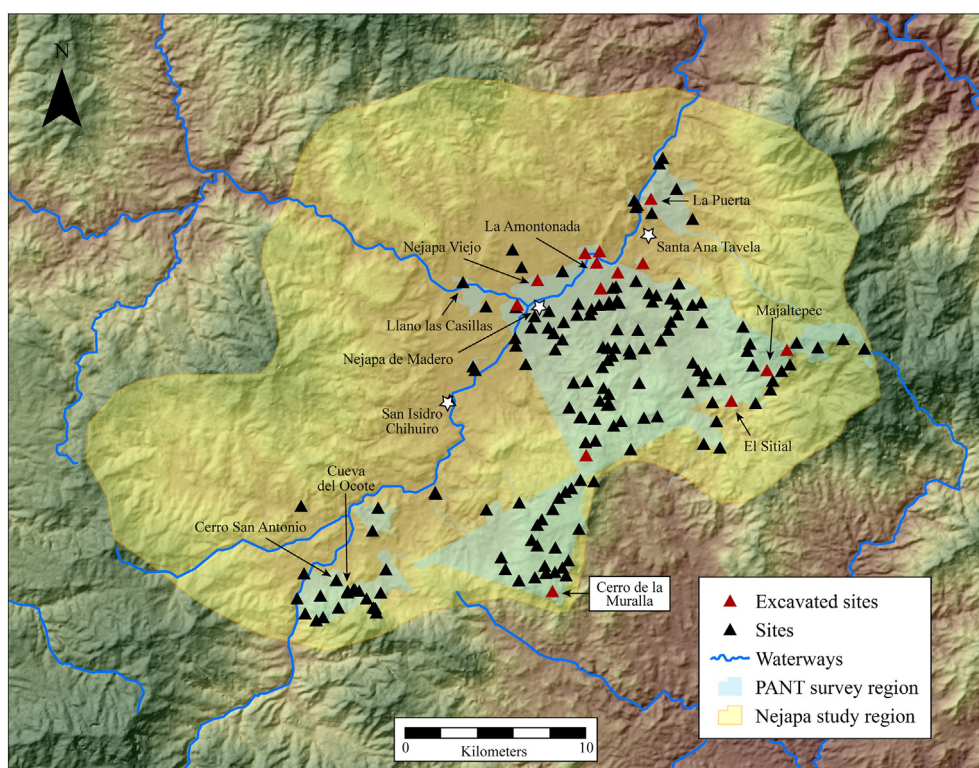


Fig. 1. Map of the Nejapa region, with PANT survey boundary marked. All sites and towns mentioned in the text are marked on the map. Modern towns are marked with a white star.

highland empires and the lowland tropics reached its height, although human occupation is documented (based on ceramic cross-ties) as early as the Middle Formative 800–500 BCE onward. Occupations during the Late Formative (500 BCE–CE 250), Classic (CE 250–800), Post-classic (CE 800–1521), and Colonial (CE 1521–1821) periods are all confirmed by radiocarbon dates (King, 2010; King et al., 2012; King et al., n.d.). People settled into dense communities located on the valley floor, on piedmont hills, and along the highest ridgetops. Such sites include significant landscape modification in the form of terracing and

house foundations, alongside mounded platform architecture and ceremonial centers with temples and ballcourts. In addition, we have documented ritual activities outside of densely occupied sites at sacred landscape features such as caves, cliffs, waterfalls, and boulders. Such activities are evidenced by the presence of petroglyphs and painted rock art, makeshift altars, and ceramic vessel offerings (King, 2015). The skeletal remains and mortuary architecture that we have found in Nejapa were largely found in areas of dense human settlement, in residential settings.

2.1. Possible tombs

This overview begins with a discussion of some of the possible tombs that we have identified in the Nejapa region. We recognize at the outset that not all below ground constructed features or voids are indicative of tombs; the Postclassic period hilltop site of El Sital, for example, included a beautifully constructed and well conserved drain measuring over 3 m in length that helped to empty water out of the playing court of a ballcourt. None of the possible tombs presented here has yet been explored through excavation, but a few of them hold promise for future research, even though their exposure likely means that they have already been looted.

One possible tomb is located at the site of La Amontonada, a ceremonial center and central administrative precinct of a large site with multiple residential neighborhoods on the valley floor. Here, atop the largest temple platform at the site, which measures 40 × 40 m at its base and rises over 10 m high, we observed finely constructed multi-coursed stone walls with cut stone facing making a right angle at the base of a looter's pit, facing to the SW. We also observed fragments of stucco indicating that the wall surface likely had been covered in plaster. Though the association with the surface architecture is unclear, these might be the walls of a tomb façade that extends deeper into the platform's core.

We also observed a finely constructed multi-coursed cut-stone wall, marking a possible tomb entrance, at the base of a looter's pit at the Late

Table 1

Inventory of human remains found during the Nejapa/Tavela Archaeological Project (2009–2013).

Sites	Number of individuals
<i>Possible tombs</i>	
La Amontonada	Not excavated
Cerro de la Muralla	Not excavated
Cerro San Antonio	Not excavated (possible drain?)
Nejapa Viejo	1 partially excavated (nothing inside)
<i>Simple burials</i>	
La Puerta	1
Nejapa Viejo	3–4
Majaltepec	5 burials; 8 individuals
<i>Burials in pots</i>	
Nejapa Viejo	2
<i>Isolated human remains</i>	
Cueva del Ocote	1 (mandible and some long bones)
La Amontonada	2 (tooth and unidentified long bone fragment)
Llanos Las Casillas	2 (various long bone and skull fragments in two separate locations)
<i>Other burials</i>	
Modern town of Nejapa	Oral accounts (observed bone)
Chihuiro	Oral accounts (observed bone)

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