



# A reanalysis of strontium isotopes from a skull and mandible cemetery at the Crenshaw site: Implications for Caddo interregional warfare

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## ABSTRACT

The 352 individuals from a skull and mandible cemetery at the Crenshaw site (3MI6) in southwest Arkansas have been argued to represent non-Caddo victims of warfare from other regions. Strontium isotopes taken from 80 individuals were processed as part of a NAGPRA grant and have been used to claim they supported evidence of interregional warfare between the Caddo and groups in the Southern Plains. A second analysis suggested that the strontium isotopes were subject to diagenesis and unusable for interpretations. A reanalysis of the results and comparison with recent literature shows that the strontium isotope results are valid. This article demonstrates the importance of considering context during analysis. The deer and people from different times and contexts have different strontium isotope ratios. Going beyond evaluating if they are local or non-local, this difference shows the potential for strontium isotope ratios to document settlement pattern change through time. Computing the biologically available strontium range using the mid-range of comparative samples (instead of the mean) is offered as a more theoretically appropriate method for investigating populations suspected of coming from the hinterlands or surrounding sites, such as those at Crenshaw. When the mid-range method is used, all individuals match the local range. Strontium isotopic data from other regions including the Midwest and Southern Plains suggest that the skulls and mandibles were not likely coming from these regions. Instead, it is hypothesized that they represent a local burial practice associated with a dispersed settlement pattern at the time the Caddo were adopting maize as a staple.

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## 1. Introduction

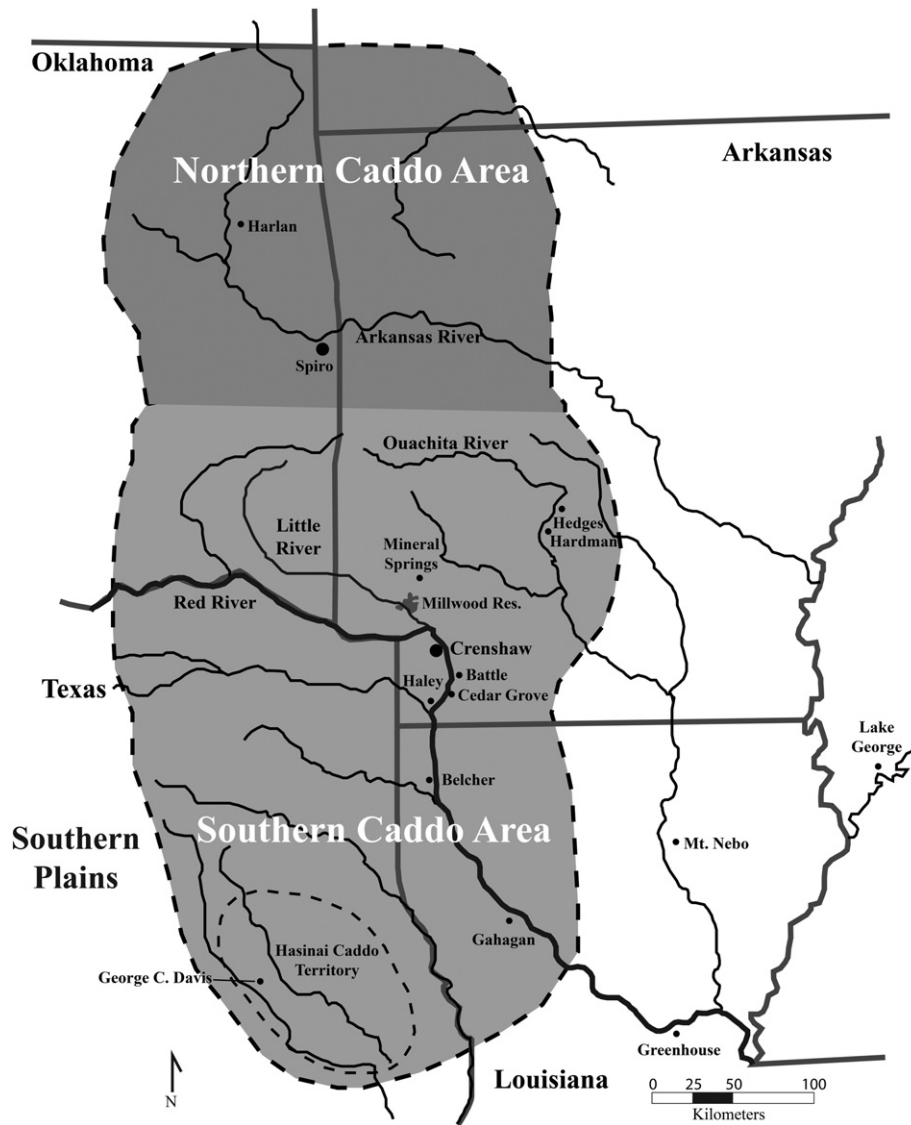
In 1983, hundreds of individuals were excavated from a skull and mandible cemetery, located on the southern portion of the Crenshaw site (3MI6). Crenshaw is a multiple mound Caddo ceremonial center in southwest Arkansas, located near the Great Bend of the Red River and within the Southern Caddo Area (Fig. 1). Recent research has suggested that the individuals in these deposits represent victims of warfare from outside of the Caddo Area, including individuals from the Southern Plains (Akridge, 2011, 2014; Burnett, 2010; Schambach, 2014; Schambach et al., 2011). This paper will reevaluate the strontium isotopic evidence and provide an alternative hypothesis to explain the practice of skull and mandible burial at the Crenshaw site.

Crenshaw was occupied between A.D. 900 and 1400 (Samuelsen, 2011, 2014) and has long been significant for having evidence of both Woodland period (500 B.C.–A.D. 1000) Fourche Maline and later (A.D. 1000–1680) Caddo traditions (Lemley, 1936; Schambach, 1982a). The archeological record of the Crenshaw site may hold evidence of a transition from a Fourche Maline to a Caddo way of life and has strongly

influenced Caddo archeology (Girard et al., 2014; Samuelsen, 2009). Crenshaw had six mounds (A through F) at the time of Clarence B. Moore's (1912) excavations of the site (Fig. 2). Mounds B and D were excavated in the 1930s. Collectors destroyed Mound C in 1961, but the University of Arkansas Museum conducted a salvage excavation of the central portion of the mound to recover as much information as possible (Durham and Davis, 1975; Wood, 1963). Mound F is centrally located at the site and was partially excavated in 1968 by the landowners (Samuelsen, 2009; Schambach, 1982a).

The cultural sequence in this region is well described by Hoffman (1970, 1971) and Schambach and Early (1982), where clear similarities are seen between the Great Bend region and the regions to the north. Jackson et al. (2012:50–2) state that an earlier Fourche Maline population is responsible for the village midden at Crenshaw and that, ca. A.D. 900, the population dispersed into the countryside to live in farmsteads. However, the site was heavily used, at least as a cemetery, during Early Caddo (A.D. 1000–1200) and Middle Caddo (A.D. 1200–1500) times based on burial artifacts and radiocarbon dates on human remains, animal bone, and charcoal samples (Durham and Davis, 1975; Moore, 1912; Samuelsen, 2014; Weinstein et al., 2003; Wood, 1963). Based on geophysical evidence, others have argued that the Caddo had a more complex settlement pattern in this region than can be

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**Fig. 1.** The Crenshaw site in the Southern Caddo Area and other relevant sites. Sites such as Spiro (Brown, 1971, 1996) and Harlan (Bell, 1984) in the Northern Caddo Area and the Coles Creek Greenhouse, Lake George, and Mt. Nebo sites (Kassabaum, 2011) have skull burials considered to be part of a local burial practice. The Hasinai Caddo territory is circled as depicted by Perttula (2009:Fig. 2) and is where historic accounts documented the taking of heads during times of war (Swanton, 1942).

described by a simple dichotomy between nucleated village and dispersed farmsteads with a vacant ceremonial center (Lockhart, 2007, 2010; McKinnon, 2008, 2010, 2013; Samuelsen, 2009, 2010).

In 1969, Frank Schambach excavated a pile of over 2000 antlers just south of an ash bed structure containing various debris associated with ceremonial use and faunal remains interpreted as representing the diet of an elite resident (Jackson et al., 2012; Schambach, 1996). In 1983, Schambach and volunteers salvaged human skulls and mandibles deposited in clusters to the west and north of the structure (Fig. 3) representing 344 individuals (Zabecki, 2011:39). These areas are referred to as the West Skull Area (WSA) and North Skull Area (NSA). Additionally, clusters of skulls were occasionally dug up by relic hunters in an area to the north. Frank Schambach excavated eight skulls from this area in 1968, referred to as the Rayburn Cluster. Some clusters were represented by a single person, others had a few skulls and a mandible included, while others consisted of as many as a hundred mandibles (Zabecki, 2011). Pieces of human skulls and teeth were also recovered from the nearby ash bed structure, suggesting they may be associated with a similar practice (Schambach, 1996). They were thought to be contemporaneous and dating from about A.D. 1000, but recent AMS dating has shown that the skull and mandible clusters date between A.D.

1253 and 1399 while the ash bed structure dates between A.D. 1161 and 1254 (Samuelsen, 2014).

The Caddo are one of a few modern tribes which can be directly traced from historic times, into the prehistoric past (Early, 2000; Perttula, 2012a; Sabo, 1998). The Caddo around Crenshaw were part of the Kaddohadacho alliance during historic times (Early, 2000; Sabo, 1998). Historic accounts of the Hasinai Caddo of eastern Texas from the late 17th and 18th centuries (Swanton, 1942:184–192) show that warfare was practiced. The primary body parts taken as trophies were scalps, but heads were brought back and eventually buried. These accounts do not mention mandibles being treated in this way. The success of these raids seemed to depend partly on an imbalance of weaponry. The Caddo clearly benefited from their ability to obtain guns and horses through trade and even the participation of Europeans in raids on neighboring groups. Henri Joutel's account (Swanton, 1942:185–186) notes that during one raid, the opposition was ready for battle until they realized that the raiders had guns. Once this was known, the fierce opposition was abandoned and everyone attempted to flee. One scalped woman was given a ball and powder and told to deliver it as a message to her people. Although access to such weaponry and the participation of Europeans may have encouraged raids, some of the observations

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