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# Taphonomy and Warfare in the Mesa Verde Region

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## Introduction

The periodic eruption of warfare among the ancestral Pueblo peoples who farmed the Mesa Verde region of the northern Southwest for more than two millennia is evidenced on the remains of many individuals by perimortem fractures of the cranium and other trauma characteristic of violence. Taphonomic study of the remains of warfare victims can reveal crucial information regarding the specific types of violent actions that were employed. An understanding of these processes can provide context for archaeological data and interpretations of violence. Taphonomy is defined here as “the study of the natural and cultural agents, processes, and events that affect human remains after death.”

This study enumerates taphonomic signatures of some types of violence and warfare that were perpetrated during the Pueblo occupation of the Mesa Verde region (see below). In addition, comparisons of the ages and sexes of victims for the two most violent periods in the Pueblo occupation of the region provide more nuanced understanding of the victims themselves. Archaeological data provide physical and societal contexts in which the violent events occurred.



Figure 1. The Montezuma Valley in the Mesa Verde region, looking south toward Shiprock, New Mexico.

## Age and Sex Data

The most abundant evidence of violence and warfare in the Mesa Verde region dates from two periods of severe and prolonged drought—the Chaco to post-Chaco transition (A.D. 1130 – 1180) and the terminal Pueblo III period (~A. D. 1280), just before the region was completely depopulated by Pueblo peoples. During the Chaco to post-Chaco transition, most lethal violence was associated with “extreme perimortem processing” of the victims’ remains (Table 1); that is, elements were fractured into small fragments. Extreme processing, and other co-occurring indicators, has been interpreted as evidence of anthropophagy, or the consumption of human flesh (Billman et al. 2000; Kuckelman et al. 2002; Turner and Turner 1999; White 1992).

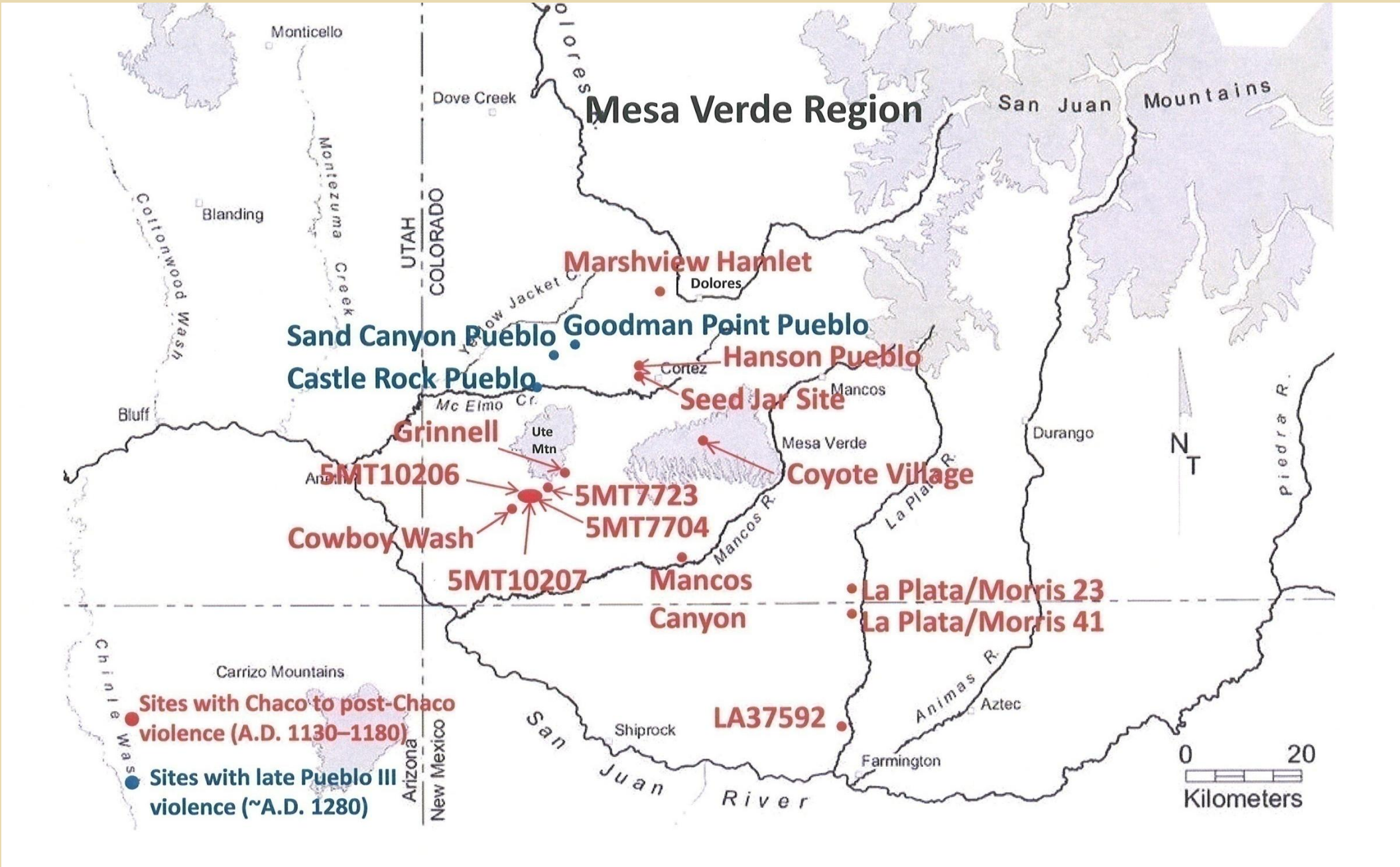


Figure 2. Map of the Mesa Verde region, showing the locations of sites with evidence of violent death and for which age or sex data are available for the victims.

During the terminal Pueblo III period, most lethal violence was characteristic of warfare (Table 2); that is, the remains of many residents of the region exhibit traits of large-scale attacks, and some of these remains also exhibit indicators of anthropophagy. The ages and sexes of victims of violence for these two time periods, for those assemblages for which age and sex were both assessable and assessed, are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

## Taphonomic Signatures of Violence and Warfare in the Mesa Verde Region

1 – Human remains in abandonment contexts (left unprotected on occupational surfaces such as floors, roofs, or extramural surfaces)

2 – Perimortem trauma (depression fractures of the cranium, parry fractures, embedded projectile points, slicing wounds to long bones, fractured teeth, broken noses)

3 – Careless disposition of remains (sprawled positioning, scattered elements)

4 – Anthropophagy, or the consumption of human flesh (disarticulation, commingled remains, fracturing, burning, pot polish, fractured teeth, cut marks, anvil abrasions, punctures, crushing, reaming)

5 – Trophy-taking (cut marks, missing elements)

6 – Carnivore damage (tooth marks, punctures, crushing, missing elements)

7 – Weathering

Table 1. Chaco to Post-Chaco (A.D. 1130–1180) Individuals Represented by Remains Subjected to Extreme Perimortem Processing.\*

Site	Child	Adult	Male	Female
Marshview Hamlet	2	4	1?	1?
Hanson Pueblo	0	2	?	?
Seed Jar Site	9	3	?	?
Coyote Village-5MV820	1	0	?	?
Grinnell	2	5	2	1
5MT7723	0	1	?	?
5MT10206	1	1	0	1
5MT10207	6	7	3	3
5MT7704	1?	1?	?	?
Cowboy Wash–5MT10010	3	4	3	1
Mancos Canyon	12	17	3	3
La Plata/Morris 23	3	2	?	?
La Plata/Morris 41	2	4	?	?
LA37592	3	5	2	3
<b>Total</b>	45	56	14	13

\* Most elements were broken into small fragments.

Table 2. Terminal Pueblo III (~A.D. 1280) Remains Left in Abandonment Contexts, Some with Skeletal Evidence of Violent Death.

Site	Child	Adult	Male	Female
Sand Canyon Pueblo	7	17	4	7
Castle Rock Pueblo	13	20	5	3
Goodman Point Pueblo	9	14	2	3
Total	29	51	11	13

## Conclusions

The age-and-sex data for these two periods of unrest in the Mesa Verde region reveal that victims were probably attacked in their residence groups and that their remains were generally deposited in proximity to their locations of death. Similar to living populations, adult males and females are nearly equally represented among these remains. The lower child:adult ratio for the terminal Pueblo III violence (29:51) as contrasted with that for the earlier period (45:56) might reflect shifting goals or a changing societal context of violence and warfare through time. Thus, during the later (terminal Pueblo III) period, children might have been taken captive or otherwise removed from settlements in which attacks occurred. In general, the taphonomic signatures of violence and warfare, as well as the age-and-sex profiles of the victims, reveal crucial aspects of violent death as well as the societal context of warfare in the Mesa Verde region.

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