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The Taphonomy of a Sacrifice: Burial 6 of the Patio Hundido at el Teul

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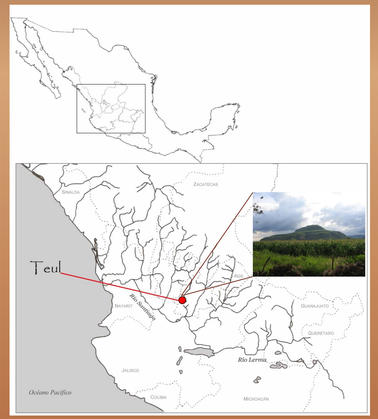
INTRODUCTION

The archaeological site of the ceremonial center of el Cerro del Teul is located in the southwestern extreme of the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. Compared to other well-known sites in the region, such as La Quemada and Alta Vista, Chalchihuites, both of which had occupations of around 5 to 6 hundred years (CE 400-1000), el Teul has shown to be continually occupied for 17 to 18 centuries, (BCE 300/200 – CE 1531). At the time of contact, the site was the religious center of the renowned Caxcanes, who would come to launch one of the most intense uprisings against the Spanish in 1541, known in history as the Mixton war. Due to the rarity of sites with this chronological continuity, el Teul offers a unique locus to study human biology in the long term. This poster will focus on a human burial found recently in the center of a plaza in one of the larger structures in the site, *el Patio Hundido* ("the Sunken Patio Complex").



PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESIS

Recent research in the last 5 years on the ritual landscape on the site of Teotihuacan using the *Huichol* worldview model, developed from recent ethnographic studies from the Gran Nayar of the West Mexico by Mexico's National Institute's (INAH) *Proyecto Gran Nayar*, has been key to offering a tool to highland Mesoamerican ritual landscape interpretation in prehispanic sites. Essential to this model is that archaeologists need to turn their site maps over, with the East up, forgetting the ever-present fixation of a North orientated view. The examination of Huichol ritual cycle and ritual centers shows that some of the most important times for ritual occur in structures correlated to the solstices, as highly delicate and liminal moments in the cycle as times of transition between rain and dry seasons. As such, within highland Mesoamerican ceremonial centers, it is proposed that the architectural complexes located "to the right", our South, should present evidence of ritual violence associated with the intense and important "cosmic battle" that occur at this time between the army of the dark underworld, the stars, and a rising celestial Venus as the Morning Star whose arrows shot at the night stars at dawn, assist the sun to emerge from the wet underworld, thus allowing for the sun to devour the rain serpents and cease the rains potential damage to corn crops, and the earth in general. Recent studies and interpretation by Jimenez (Jimenez et. Al. 2005) for the site of Teotihuacan see this correlation for the contexts of multiple mass burial concentrations found along the edge of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid by Sugiyama and Cabrera in the late 80's. The presence of human remains with hands bound and covered with obsidian *Xiucoatl* proyectil points in a complex associated with Venus as Morning Star has been proposed as ritual evidence for winter solstice transition. The burial examined from el Teul, also from a large ritual compound in the southern sector of the monumental center offers correlates suggestive of this ritual violence.

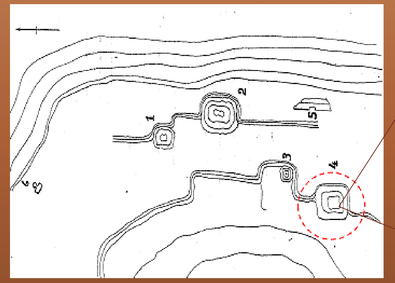
Posted at Swarthmore College, Swat Print, Jan 2010

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this analysis, we draw on both the skeletal evidence and material culture of the sacrificial burial/offering of burial 6 of the *Patio Hundido* at el Teul, in conjunction with ritual landscape models using Huichol cosmology. This poster focuses on a ritually-sacrificed male whose body was deposited as an offering in one of the main architectural complexes of the site during the early to mid-Classic (ca. 200 d.C.-400/450 d.C.). The analysis moves from the identification of violence and trauma, which requires a nuanced and detailed analysis of both material culture and human remains, to an infused ethnohistoric exploration of Huichol cosmology as it relates to the archaeological site. By combining the synthesized analysis of the data (biological, archeological, ethnohistoric, and historic) we were able to create an intriguing new interpretation of this particular piece of performance violence that took place at el Teul.

Bioarchaeologists "look for life in patterns of death" by synthesizing biology and culture into a biocultural framework that allows for a more holistic interpretation of skeletal material (Martin *et al*., 1991). Skeletal tissues offer an exceptional perspective on prehistory, because they provide an amalgamated documentation of how the biology of humans is affected by their cultural and environmental settings. However, preservation at this location within the site is poor. Skeletal remains frequently disintegrate when they are removed from the soil matrix. As a result, in situ measurements are taken and multiple photographs of diagnostic characteristics are taken.

Dr. Pérez's analysis of the male skeleton focused on distinguishing injuries from the effects of the environment, postmortem human activity, or animal interference. This knowledge, when combined with that of archaeology, allows for the recovery of buried remains and gives insight into how the victims were placed in the ground. Natural taphonomic marks on the bone must be identified in order to allow for the identification of perimortem trauma (Pérez *et al*. 2008). On the other hand, natural taphonomic data can also provide insight regarding place of death, transport, and human agency (Lyman, 1994 , 2002). This study involves a detailed analysis of perimortem and postmortem tool-induced alterations on burial 6 of the *Patio Hundido*. The methodology used in this project integrates osteological analyses with archaeological data from el Teul and adheres to a rigorous scientific agenda where hypotheses are developed out of theories and models are tested for confirmation or rejection. The male from burial 6 was analyzed for patterns pertaining to health, trauma, and post mortem modification.



This sketch drawn by José Corona Núñez (1958, lám. 1) shows the location of the Patio Hundido (number 4). We have oriented the drawing along the east – west axis and as discussed earlier the architectural complexes located "to the right", or the South, present evidence of ritual performance violence associated with the intense and important "cosmic battle."

1. Lower mound (from the grouping known today as the Plaza of the two mounds).
2. Upper Mound (Corona refers to it as "the church").
3. Unidentified.
4. Grouping currently known as *Patio Hundido.*
5. Terraced sidewalk excavated by Corona.
6. Shaft tomb.

RESULTS

The sacrificial burial/offering of Burial 6 is an adult male showing no evidence of blunt or sharp force trauma. However, it should be noted that the poor condition of the bones precludes a definitive analysis. The victim was placed on his right side in a flexed position with his head facing south. Two vessels were placed in the burial/offering one at his feet and the other at his head. This bowl placed near the victim's head has the symbol of an eagle rising painted on it and is very important, since the eagle to the Huichol is the Sun. Thus, we have in this vessel iconography that correlates with the rising sun out of the underworld which is the vital action during the winter solstice.

The victim appears to have been shot in the abdomen with an obsidian point. Based on the location of the point it appears that the shooter was standing above the victim (who was possibly kneeling) and the arrow was fired downward into the abdomen terminating near the small intestine and the sigmoid colon. It appears that the stem, the modified bottom of the blade for hafting onto a shaft or handle, broke when the arrow was being removed. Had this not happened we would have no indication of the possible cause of death. But because the point was left in the abdomen we were given a second clue regarding the purpose of this man's death. As you can see in the Huichol yarn tablas in the "Purpose and Hypothesis" section of this poster a "cosmic battle" occurs between the army of the dark underworld, the stars, and a rising celestial Venus as the Morning Star. The arrows shot at the night stars at dawn (specifically into the abdomen), assist the sun to emerge from the wet underworld, thus allowing for the sun to devour the rain serpents and stopping the rains from flooding the corn crops, and the earth in general.

In situ photo of victim with obsidian point in abdomen

Obsidian Point imbedded in the abdomen of the sacrificial victim

This bowl placed near the victims head has the symbol of an eagle rising painted on it

CONCLUSIONS

Ritual landscape models currently applied to larger sites such as Teotihuacán using Huichol cosmology suggest the possible correspondence with the sacrificial burial/offering of burial 6 of the *Patio Hundido* at el Teul with ritual sacrifice related to winter solstice with Venus playing an active role. Inquiry regarding the specific types of trauma at both locations along with iconography and material cultural analysis imbedded within Huichol cosmology allow for the examination of how the symbolic aspects of violence have the potential to create order and disorder depending on the specific social context within which the violence is expressed (Pérez, 2011). Bodies evidencing such trauma become the parchment upon which the literal writing of violence codifies meaning and structure to the objective world they occupy(Pérez, 2010). The literal "language" of violence is then reproduced in iconography and oral forms which are used by the community to explain and relive the never-ending "cosmic battles" that are correlated to the solstices.

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