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Taphonomy After the Fact: Violence and Ritual in Room 33 at Chaco and Room 178 at Aztec

Abstract

Chaco Canyon's Room 33 (excavated by George Pepper) and Aztec Ruins room 178 (excavated by Earl Morris) are recognized for their rich taphonomic context. These two mortuary features reveal a great deal of information about ritualized behavior. Researchers such as Akins and Palkovich have provided partial analyses of the Chaco skeletal material in the 1980s. The reanalysis of those remains considers the Chaco burials in relation to those at Aztec and analyzes their meaning through a thorough analysis of the grave goods, archaeological records, and ethnohistorical documents to provide a better understanding of these elaborate and unique mortuary rooms. Specifically, this study focuses on signatures of identity, biological, cultural, and socioeconomic. Biological identity markers include age, sex, and stature. Cultural identity includes mortuary context, graves goods, and site layout. Socioeconomic identity, which is the hardest to reconstruct is evidenced by the frequency and distribution of trauma related to exposure to violence, changes to anatomy related to unequal amounts of labor, and susceptibility to diseases over time. The result of looking at all these factors is that it is possible to reconstruct identity, such as Burial 3672 in Room 33. This male is especially intriguing because the burial shows evidence of extensive perimortem fractures on the cranium suggesting a violent death, and yet this is a very high status individual based on the stature and isotopic analysis as well as the grave offerings he was interred with. These kinds of taphonomic and mortuary features are explored.

Keywords

Violence, Ritual, Southwest, Social Inequality, Elites

Taphonomy After The Fact: Violence and Ritual

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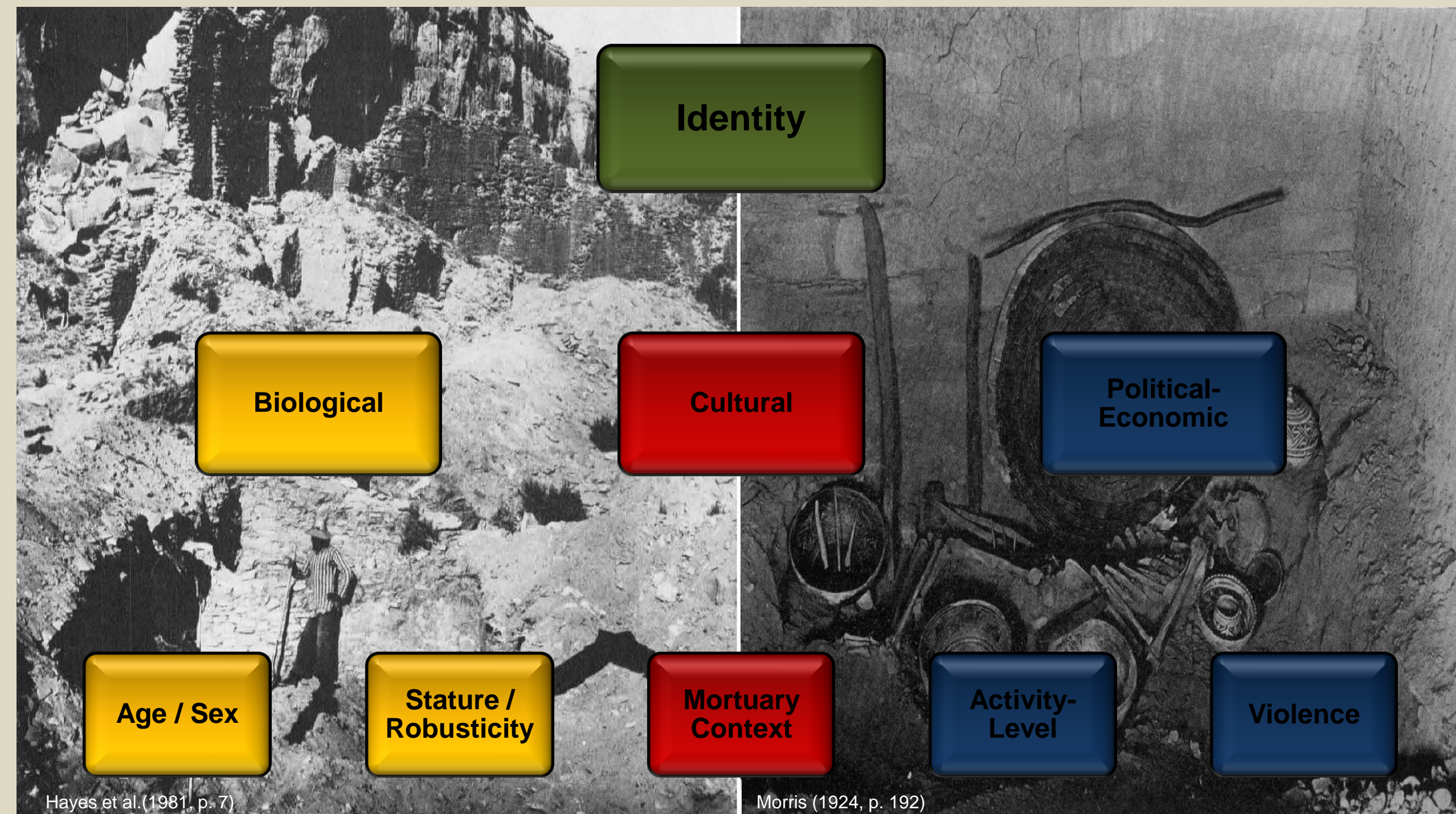
Room 33 at Chaco

Room 178 at Aztec

OBJECTIVES: To investigate ritual spaces, violence and sex for two related Southwest sites using taphonomic and skeletal data.

BACKGROUND: Room 33 (“Gambler’s House”) at Pueblo Bonito and Room 178 (the “Warrior’s Grave”) at Aztec Ruin are among two of the most elaborate burial contexts in the American Southwest during the Pueblo period.

METHODOLOGY: This project relies on archaeological and bioarchaeological methods to determine the identity of these individuals and the role they played in the Ancestral Pueblo culture. The approach is to understand the biological (age/sex and stature/robusticity), cultural (mortuary context) and political –economic (activity-level and violence) markers of identity.



RESULTS: The two individuals from Room 33 and the one from Room 178 all share the following:

- These males were aged between 40-50+ and they were taller in stature than the average Pueblo male.
- The remains were complete, with no major taphonomic changes (i.e., rodent gnawing or weathering), and interred with a vast amount of grave goods, suggesting these were primary burials.
- No evidence of repeated exposure to violence (non-lethal trauma).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Analysis of these and other remains from Pueblo Bonito and Aztec, currently housed at the AMNH, with a focus on entheses and non-lethal trauma.

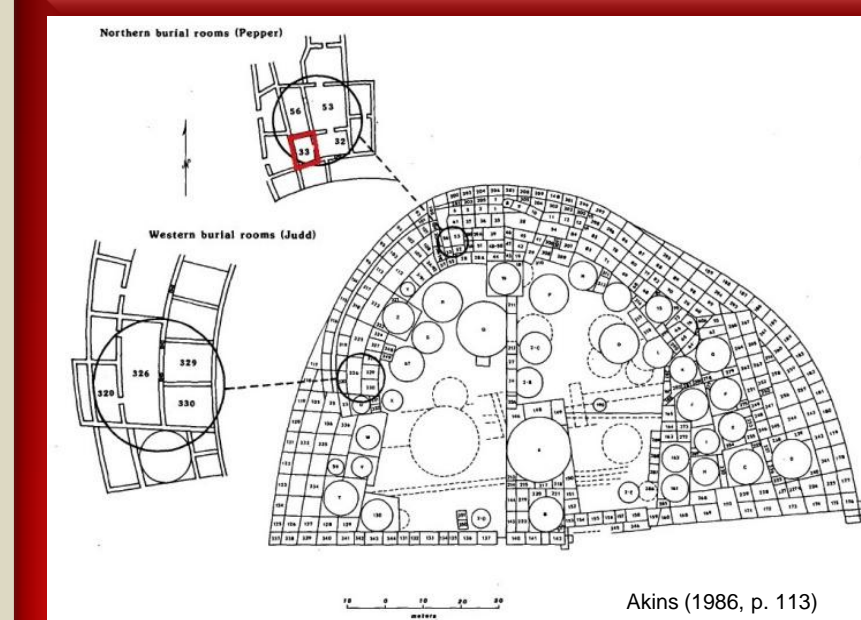
Burial	Stature	Robusticity
3671	171.47	12.75
3672	166.50	12.85
8070	172.15	12.16

Site	Stature	Robusticity
Black Mesa	163.1	12.25
La Plata	161.4	12.06
Puye	160.0	–
Arroyo Hondo	162.0	–
Alkalai Ridge	165.4	12.75
Carter Ranch	162.6	–
Hawikku	160.5	–
Mesa Verde	162.1	11.70
1930's Pueblo	163.7	–

(Martin et al., 2001; Stodder 2010)

Sample	Stable Nitrogen Isotope
3671	11.4 ‰ ¹⁵ N ‰
3672	12.4 ‰ ¹⁵ N ‰
BM II/III–Pueblo	5.7- 8.6 ‰ ¹⁵ N ‰

*More access to meat = High status (Coltrain et al., 2007)



The burials at both sites are interred with elaborate grave goods.

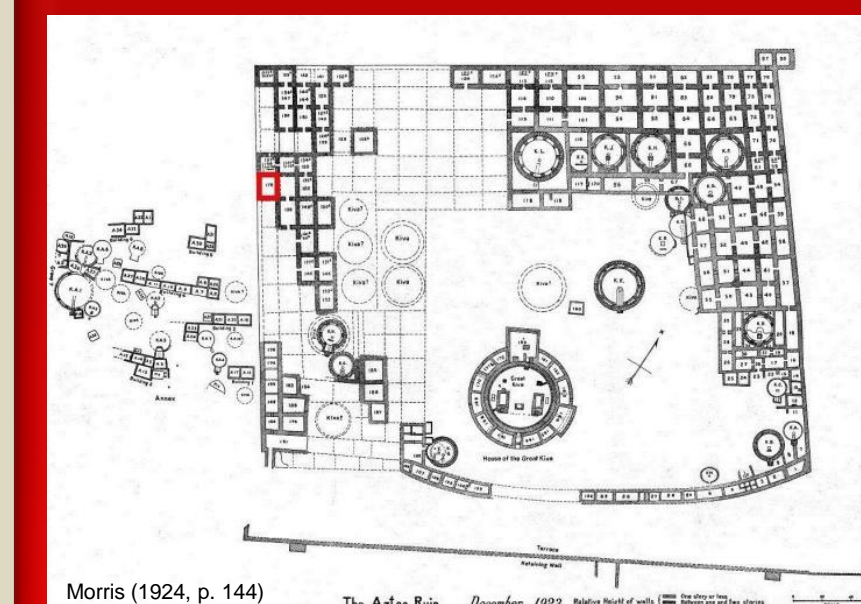
Pueblo Bonito

- 3671 – 5,890 turquoise beads, 10 turquoise pendants, 4 turquoise sets, 3 shell beads, 2 vessels. (Pepper N.D.)

- 3672 – 11,309 turquoise beads, 532 turquoise pendants, 11 effigy pendants, 12 shell and/or stone beads, 5 shell pendants. (Pepper N.D.)

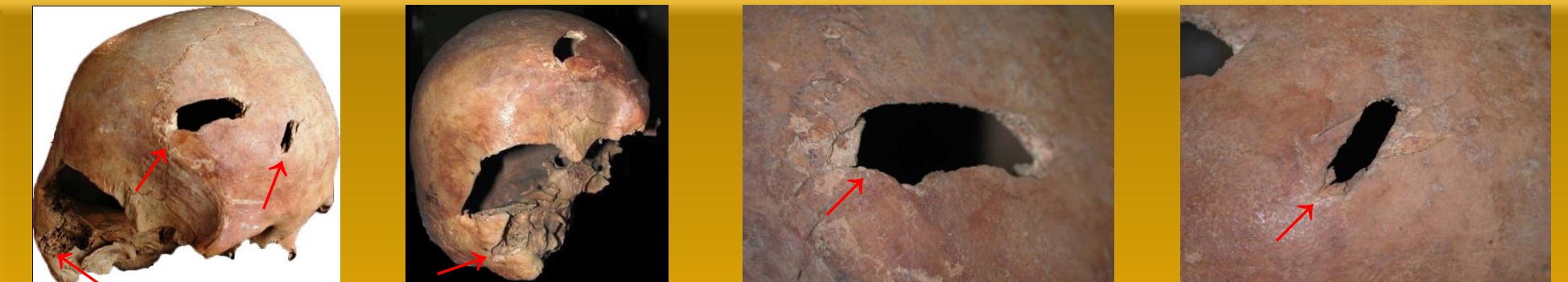
Aztec Ruins

- 8070 – 1 shield, 1 sword, 2 stone axes, at least 5 vessels, 1 lithic toolkit. (Morris 1924)



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Confirming Akin's (1986) and Turner and Turner's (1999) findings, there are 3 separate perimortem fractures on the cranium of Burial 3672 based on at least one of three of the following characteristics being present:

- The edges are sharp (at least where postmortem damage has not occurred).
- There is a hinge fracture.
- There are fractures radiating from the injury.

Why was this individual murdered?

- Did he violate social norms?
 - Does not explain the grave goods.
- Was he a warrior or an elite for the culture that upon death was venerated?
 - Would explain the grave goods, but why so many? – 8070 at Aztec was considered to be a warrior, but without as many grave goods.
- Was he a warrior or an elite that offered himself or was offered as a sacrifice (Baadsgaard et al., 2011 found similar cranial evidence in Ur).
 - Explains the grave goods (maybe quantity as well) along with the other violent deaths in the upper level of Room 33 (e.g., Burial 3 and Burial 10).

DISCUSSION: There are many theories about these burials but the bioarchaeological data presented here support prior work by Akins (1986) that indicated the individuals were of higher social status. However, these males were likely more than just high ranking; they continued to be important in society even after death, remaining very much a part of the living.

- Interment over several generations in Room 33. Oldest burial (AD 690-940); most recent burial (AD 1023-1185) (Plog and Heitman 2010).
- The elaborate ritual and ceremonial context of these burials.

CONCLUSION: The reanalysis of these so-called “major dudes” (Lekson 1999, p. 26) in the Southwest confirmed and elaborated upon theories about how these individuals had more power and access to resources than others. They were afforded a level of ritualized burial treatment suggesting a central role.

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