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# Violence against People, Bodies, or Bones: Lessons from La Plata, New Mexico

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# Violence against People, Bodies, or Bones: Lessons from La Plata, New Mexico

## **Abstract**

Situated between Chaco Canyon and the Mesa Verde, the Totah region has an equally long and complex history. Human remains were recovered from excavations at 17 sites in the La Plata Valley dating from Basketmaker through Pueblo III. Trauma to skeletal remains ranges from violence survived by women, to perimortem violence, to disturbance of the dead, to random pieces of burned and broken bone. This presentation will provide a close look at the contexts of these situations, with an emphasis on chronology and relationships to surrounding regions.

## **Keywords**

Pueblo Southwest, taphonomy, perimortem violence, postmortem processing, archaeological context, Totah



# VIOLENCE AGAINST PEOPLE, BODIES, OR BONES: LESSONS FROM LA PLATA, NEW MEXICO

H. Wolcott Toll & Nancy J. Akins



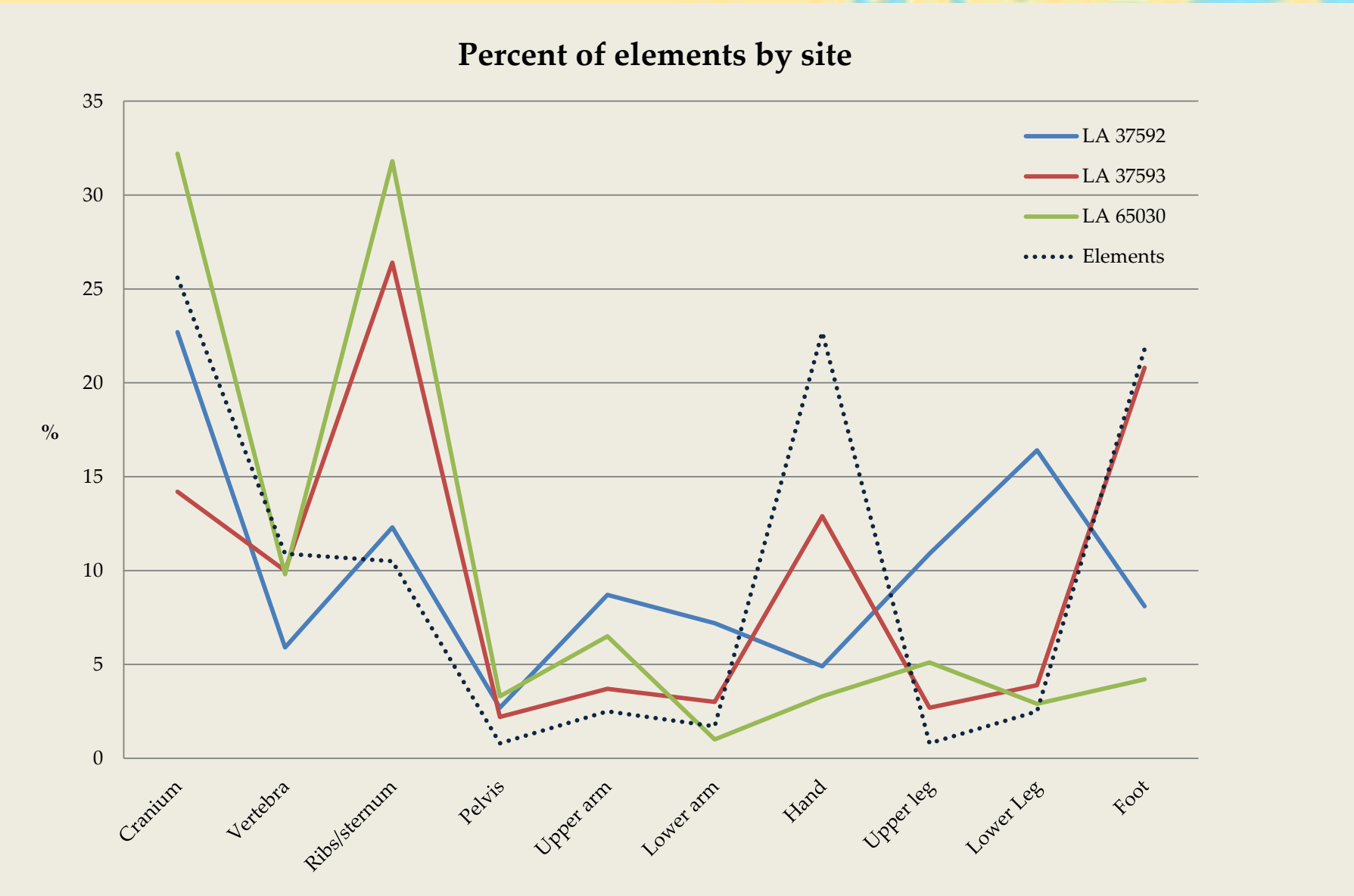
Office of Archaeological Studies, Santa Fe

## INTRODUCTION

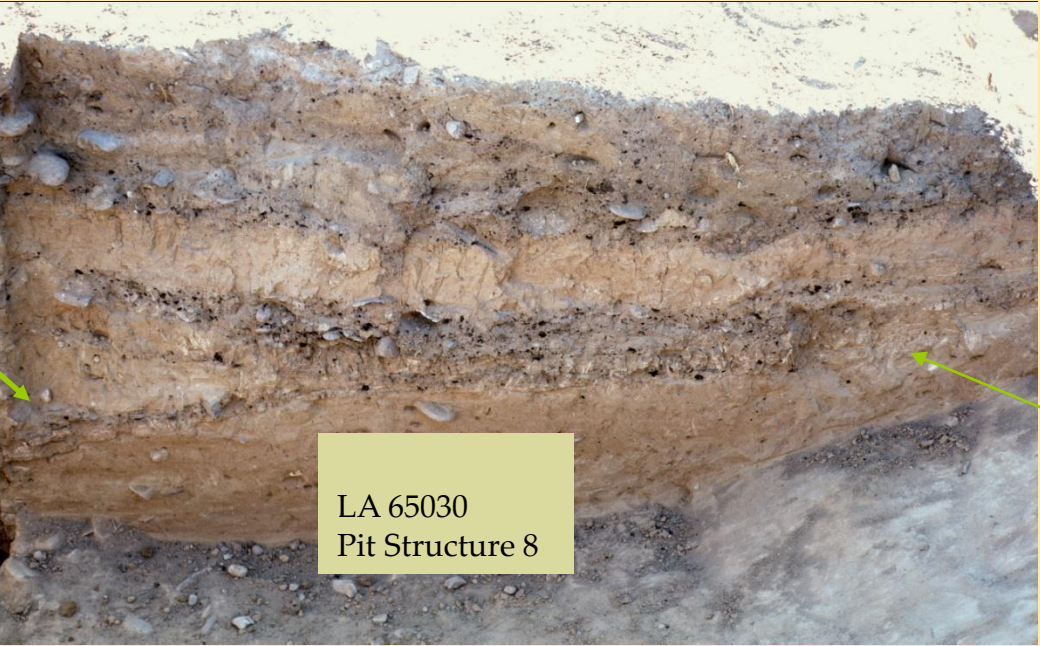
The La Plata Valley in modern northwestern New Mexico is a well- watered, long-occupied, agriculturally favorable place. As in the surrounding Totah and greater San Juan Basin, farming populations ranged across elevations and locations in response to varying climatic conditions. Through time areas of denser settlement—communities—occurred in different settings, with particularly favorable ones seeing longer, more intensive use. Heaviest use of these areas was in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (mid Pueblo II to early Pueblo III). Office of Archaeological Studies excavations at 17 sites recovered 67 human burials and over 3500 pieces of disarticulated human bone from two of the communities in the lower half of the valley (Martin et. al., 2001).

## THE SITE ASSEMBLAGES

Three discrete assemblages at three sites account for a majority of the disarticulated human remains: LA 37592, 37593, and 65030. Each site assemblage represents a different **time segment** and each is distinct in several respects (table). Compared to the line for whole elements, the degree of fragmentation in the assemblages is high, especially in ribs, as seen in the graph below.



**LA 65030** Although it has the largest artifactual sample from the project, LA 65030 has the smallest **disarticulated remains sample** of the three sites discussed here. Most of the remains (300 of 400) are from the fill of one of the **eight** pit structures at the site. The site was occupied from mid Pueblo II through early Pueblo III. This assemblage comes from the fill of one of the earliest, mid Pueblo II structures. Six burials were recorded from the pit structure, 3 of which were intact. The burned roofing layer contained a large quantity of human bone in varying states of disarticulation. **Carnivore damage** is extensive, affecting at least three individuals. Disarticulation was exacerbated by mechanical trenching, but was clearly present before. Some of the burning is heavy, indicating the absence of flesh when burned. Other bone is remarkably sound, indicating minimal exposure to weathering. This bone shows impacts from being moved during site occupation, supplemented by carnivore activity.



Roofing and human bon layer

Site	LA 37592	LA 37593	LA 65030
Dates	Pueblo III 1125-1300	Late Pueblo II 1075-1125	Middle Pueblo II 1000-1075
Location	Kiva upper fill	Pit structure upper fill	Pit structure just above floor
Deposit	Midden	Cobbles in clean sandy fill	Alluvium , cobbles and burned roof material
Individuals	7-10	17	11-12
Males	2	4	1-2
Female	1-2	3	3
Children	4-6	10	7
All elements	395	2049	300
Post cranial bones	304	1559	227
% complete	2.0	32.8	6.6
% > 50%	18.1	12.9	14.1
% < 50%	79.9	54.3	79.3
% carnivore damaged	1.0	2.6	12.6
% light burn	5.8		
% light to medium burn	2.3	0.1 (human ?)	0.3
% heavy burn	1.3		4.0
% calcine	0.3		
Total burned	9.7	0.1	4.3
% longitudinal breaks	4.0	0.3	
% with transverse breaks		0.2	
% with diagonal breaks		0.4	
% with spiral breaks	9.6	0.2	
% with impact breaks	8.9	0.8	5.7
% with peels	2.0	0.1	1.3
% with chops	0.3		0.3
% with cuts	1.7		
% with scrapes or abrasions		0.3	2.0
% with crenulated edges	1.5		
% hollowed	.5		
Total altered bone	22.0	3.8	9.7

## References

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Turner, Christy G. and Jacqueline A. Turner

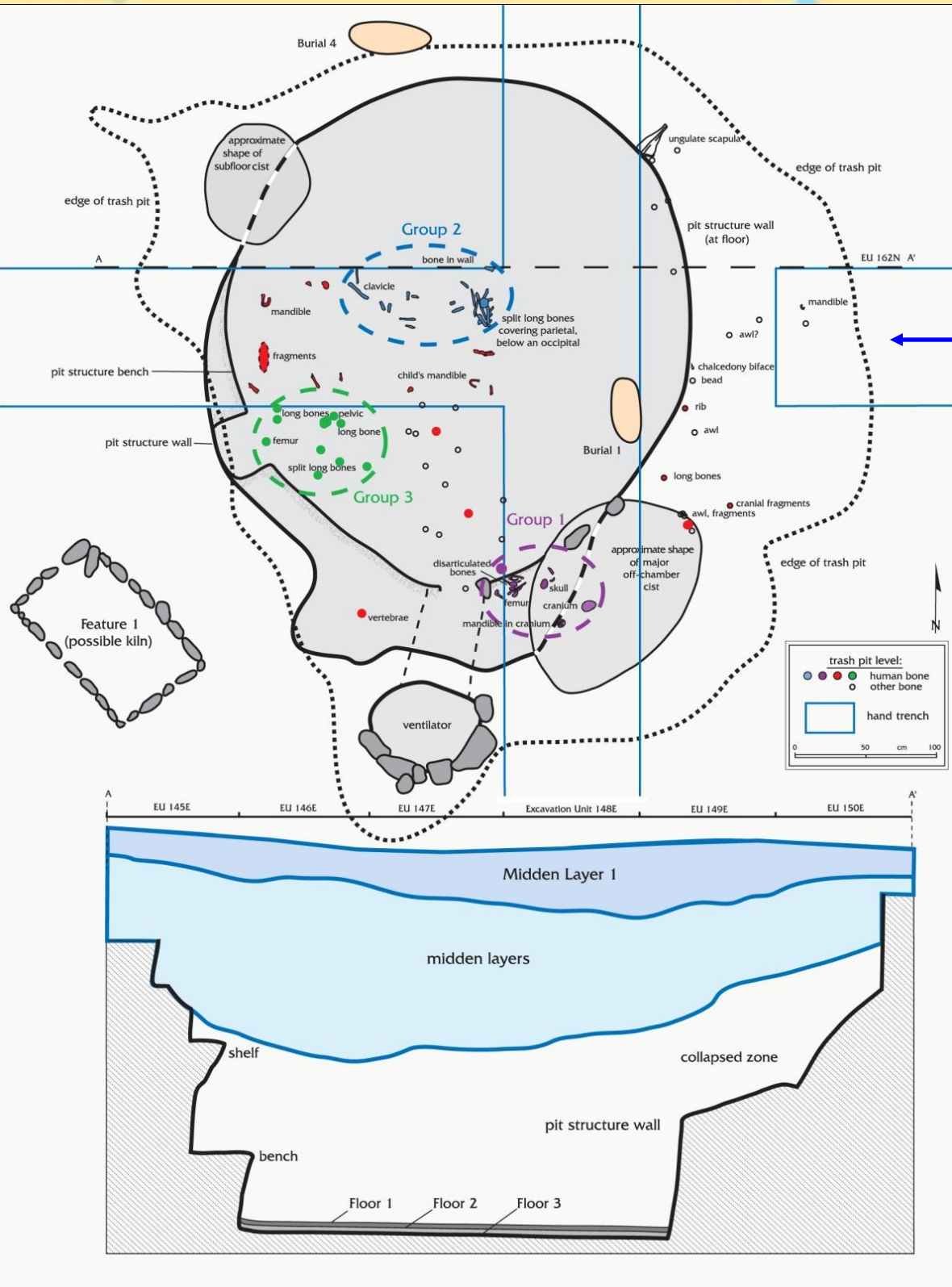
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Thanks to Robert H. Turner for figures and layout help.

**LA 37593** Located south of LA 65030 in the Jackson Lake cluster, two rooms, several large storage cists, and a pit structure dating to around 1100 were excavated at this site. The upper fill of the pit structure has a much larger **disarticulated human remains sample** (2040 of the 2203 from this site), representing a larger **number of individuals** than in the other two assemblages. More are complete elements than in the other two site assemblages. Burning and carnivore damage are negligible and the types of breaks tend to be those that have a number of causes, including – as in this case -- redeposition during pueblo remodeling and mechanical trenching.



**LA 37592** This site is near LA 37593 and was occupied in several phases from the mid 1000s to almost 1200. In the very last episode at the site a large deposition of disarticulated bone occurred in the uppermost fill of the only pit structure. This assemblage (395 of the 437 from this site) is the most problematic. Most of the bones are broken into small pieces, more elements display a range of **burning**, indicating flesh was present when some were burned. The types of alteration are much more complex, including **cuts** and intentional placement of altered elements.

## CONCLUSIONS

A number of processes generated these disarticulated and altered human bone assemblages. Disturbance by carnivores and erosion, alternative burial practices, modern and ancient construction events, and responses to environmental or sociopolitical stresses have been identified. These assemblages defy simplistic explanation.

The **LA 37592** assemblage has many characteristics considered by White (1992) and Turner (1993) to result from intentional dismemberment and cooking, but it has far less evidence of violent battering and mutilation than those from Mancos. "Pot polish" and percussion pits do not occur, and few pieces have adhering flakes. The two percent of **elements with cuts** is at the low end of the range reported by White: 1.0 percent at Grinnell to 11.7 percent at Mancos. Other alterations, while they occur, seem to be less intense than those found in the Mancos assemblage.

Breakage associated with movement of burials in varying states of decomposition and dumping or tossing cobbles during the relocation process and modern construction activities can account for the LA 37593 disarticulated assemblage.

Attributes of the disarticulated assemblage at **LA 65030** are intermediate in frequency compared to the two later sites. **Carnivores** certainly contributed to the breakage and disarray in that structure, and redeposition damage, as at **LA 37593**, is likely. The burned elements and broken crania may have resulted from secondary disposal incurred during the long subsequent occupation of the pueblo.

While element distributions between Mancos and **LA 37592** are the most similar, the line between the expected, whole elements is most similar to that of **LA 37593**, further suggesting the deposition of whole, unmodified skeletons at that site.

The variability within and across these three assemblages shows once again how single cause explanations are unlikely to be valid.

