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

Ryan P. Harrod
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, rharrod2@uaa.alaska.edu

Debra L. Martin
University of Nevada - Las Vegas, debra.martin@unlv.edu

Shawn W. Carlyle
University of Utah, shawn.carlyle@anthro.utah.edu

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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, grave 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

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Taphonomy After The Fact: Violence and Rritual

Ryan P. Harrod¹, Debra L. Martin¹ and Shawn W. Carlyle²
¹Department of Anthropology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas ²Department of Anthropology, University of Utah

Room 33 at Chaco

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 are 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-letal trauma).

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

Room 178 at Aztec

Burial Stature Robusticity
3761 171.47 12.75
3762 168.50 12.80
3764 172.15 12.16

Site Stature Robusticity
Black Mesa 163.1 12.25
La Plata 161.2 12.06
Puye 160.0
Alkali Ridge 165.0 12.75
Carls Ranch 162.8 –
Hovenk 180.0
Mesa Verde 162.1 11.70
1930’s Pueblo 163.1
(Martí et al., 2001; Snyder 2012)

Sample Stable Nitrogen Isotope
3761 11.4 6.5N %
3762 12.4 6.5N %
3764 11.7 6.5N %

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.

- Intermittent over several generations in Room 33. Oldest burial (AD 690-840); 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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