Evidence of Violent Conflict in Males from Pot Creek Pueblo

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Abstract
Skeletal evidence of violence in the American Southwest is well known and both healed and peri-mortem trauma has been reported at many sites, including high rates of cranial injury supporting evidence of warfare. The present study examines the peri-mortem skeletal injuries in three young males from Pot Creek Pueblo (AD 1260-1320) located in the Taos Valley. Of the individuals analyzed from the Taos Valley, peri-mortem trauma only occurred in these three males, although healed ante-mortem injuries were present in several other individuals. CT scans of the skulls provided an additional method of analysis of the injuries and data necessary to differentiate peri-mortem trauma from post-mortem damage in one case. The pattern of peri-mortem blunt force and chopping force trauma to the skulls and post-cranial remains suggests hand-to-hand combat occurred and these individuals died from chopping trauma to the skull, potentially from warfare related activities. Additionally, comparisons of the trauma patterns to rock art dating to the period suggests the type of weapon depicted may have been utilized to inflict the trauma to the skulls.

Keywords
blunt force trauma, hand-to-hand combat, pueblo, American Southwest, bioarchaeology, Northern Rio Grande, Taos

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Evidence of Violent Conflict in Males from Pot Creek Pueblo

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INTRODUCTION

Evidence of violent conflict in the American Southwest is present in almost all regions, with a marked increase beginning in the late AD 1100s and almost ubiquitous by the 1300s. Much of the literature, however, only provides indirect evidence for interpersonal conflict. Many of the studies argue violent conflict occurred because of the presence of defensive architecture, site burning, non-formally buried bodies, rock art depicting warriors holding clubs and shields, ethnographic data of prehistoric conflict, extreme dismemberment of individuals, and healed blunt force cranial trauma. Direct evidence of fatal trauma appears only sporadically in the archaeological record, leaving much of the evidence indirect or probabilistic in nature. Much of the skeletal evidence of conflict is limited to cases of extreme dismemberment, healed blunt trauma in locations on the skull that suggest possible accident or abuse and not actual combat, or non-formally buried skeletal remains sprawled on floors of pithouses or kivas with no evidence of direct trauma. Thus, there are few means to determine whether fighting actually occurred, or if the violence was the result of ritual deposits, raiding parties, massacres, or abuse. Evidence of fatal traumatic trauma in nature is rare, even though much rock art is devoted to the depiction of warriors using shields and clubs or warriors engaged in combat.

The present study focuses on skeletal remains from Pot Creek Pueblo (AD 1260-1320), a Coalition, Pueblo III site in Taos, New Mexico. Though interpersonal violence can be inferred from cases of healed blunt force trauma to the cranium, non-formally buried bodies, and dismemberment evident at numerous sites in the Taos Valley during the proceeding Developmental Period, only the remains from Pot Creek Pueblo have direct evidence of fatal, peri-mortem trauma. These remain represent a rare line of evidence for interpersonal violence, and potentially warfare related deaths, in the American Southwest.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The Taos Valley is located in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and the Ancestral Puebloan inhabitants of this region represent the northern-most occupation in the Northern Rio Grande. The valley is bounded by the Rio Grande on the west and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the east.

Pot Creek Pueblo is situated in the Rio Grande del Rancho Valley in the southern portion of the Taos Valley. Two permanent water sources are available close to the site, the Rio Grande del Rancho and Río del Olla. Pot Creek Pueblo was occupied approximately AD 1260-1320 and represents a very short lived aggregated pueblan occupation that spanned approximately three generations. Construction of the aggregated pueblo rooms began in the late 1260s with a building surge in the 1310s created piazza spaces surrounding a Great Kiva, dating to AD 1318. The site was excavated over a fifty-year period by Southern Methodist University and burials were encountered between 1987 and 1984.

Abandonment of the site occurred sometime during the 1320s, and the Great Kiva was never completed. Adler notes evidence that much of the southern portion of the site was purposefully burned at abandonment and that social friction caused by the death of a woman may have caused the split and abandonment of the village.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Skeletal remains available for study from Pot Creek Pueblo included 47 individuals, 18 males, 21 females, and 8 children 0-5 years of age. Life expectancy was 24.47 years at birth. Average stature for males was 156.80 +/- 7.72 cm and females was 159.80 +/- 5.19 cm.

All remains, excluding two individuals buried on the second floor of roomblock two and one child in a kiva in roomblock eight, were found with ash, trash, and one or more stones covering the body and were in an extremal context. Differential diagnosis of trauma included recording the location, number of fractures, types of fractures, presence of abnormal/pathological bone, color of the edges, and shape of the trauma. Blunt force trauma patterns were categorized and described according to the terminology defined by Galloway. CT scans were taken for documentation and inspection of fracture patterns to the endocranial surfaces.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The pattern of peri-mortem, fatal trauma injury in the cranium, coupled with the multiple blows to the cranium and post-cranial skeleton, is typical of individuals engaging in hand-to-hand combat. The sharp margins and lack of healing indicate these skulls were fractured while the bone was still fresh. Absence of healing suggests the trauma occurred at the same time and resulted in the death of the individual. Additionally, the multiple fractures and severity of the injuries suggests that the individuals involved several blows with an opponent and that there was a preference for hand wielded weapons. This conclusion is based data collected by Shepherd et al. indicating that during an assault, injury increases in severity as the alleged number of blows increased and victims reporting more than three blows were more likely to have a fracture.

Additionally, rock art dating to the period may provide a clue to the type of weapon utilized to inflict the trauma to the skulls. Schafroth provides evidence of rock art images found in the American Southwest depicting warriors holding shields and two types of clubs, one pointed and the other rounded, that date to the time period Pot Creek Pueblo was inhabited. The trauma present on the remains is consistent with an individual wielding such a weapon, with the club striking the skull or face (Cases 2 and 3) and the handle coming into contact with the mandible (Case 3) or lateral superior portion of the orbit (Case 3). In both Cases 2 and 3, the angle of the fractures and the type of damage inflicted are consistent with a strike in which both club and the hand come into motion in concert, impacting the orbital region of the face and skull. Fractures, usually an indication of interpersonal conflict, are absent in the individuals in this case study. However, this absence may reflect the use of shields, as depicted in the rock art, to protect the arms against attack during combat rather than a lack of defensive wounds.

Evidence of violent conflict is endemic in the American Southwest. The injuries sustained by these individuals from Pot Creek Pueblo represent a rare example of fatal peri-mortem trauma consistent with participation in hand-to-hand combat in the Southwest. Additionally, this study represents the first evidence of trauma patterns that could have resulted from the use of a weapon depicted in the local rock art.