Contextualizing Death and Trauma at Canyon del Muerto

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Contextualizing Death and Trauma at Canyon del Muerto

Abstract
This poster explores how human taphonomy offers insight to understanding the structural violence that impacted the discovery, recovery, and analysis of human remains from sites within Canyon del Muerto, (400-1300AD). Also included in this analysis is a discussion of the temporal relationship of these sites juxtaposed with the rise and fall of the Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon complexes focusing on the role of interpersonal violence, discussed through the analysis of death-related forces. These ideas are then presented within an examination of indirect forms of structural violence, which often mitigated the physical violence endured by this population.

Keywords
skeletal trauma, structural violence, American Southwest
Contextualizing Death and Trauma at Canyon del Muerto

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ABSTRACT

This poster explores how human turnover offers insight into understanding the structural violence that impacted the discovery, recovery, and analysis of human remains from sites such as those at Mesa Verde, which had become attractions to the larger public as well. By employing human pathology defined by Neave et al. (1995:131) as “...focusing on the death-related forces that influence the discovery, recovery, and analysis of human remains...” this silenced piece of Southwestern history is exposed. In its broadest sense, this requires first an examination of the structural (indirect) violence that has impeded the discovery, recovery, and analysis of both sites and the human remains from Canyon del Muerto, by focusing this discussion on the impact of legislative actions from 1906 to 1927 that sharply shape the course of Southwestern archaeology. Most notably Antiquities Public Law chapter 69 § 1917 moves the theater of archaeology out of the state of Arizona. Second, a brief discussion of the sites, artifacts, and human remains that were excavated, but until now remain virtually unrelated, is needed to shed light on the temporal relationship of those living within del Muerto, juxtaposed with the rise and fall of the Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon complexes. The role of interpersonal violence is also reflected through the direct analysis of death-related forces on skeletal remains to open the conversation about the relationships between communities in Canyon del Muerto with those in the Chacoa and Mesa Verdean complexes.

Canyon del Muerto presents a geographically important position in the Ancient Southwest. This suggests that, in the words of E.H. Morris: “...Canyon del Muerto is the key position to a large area in the Southwest, comprising the drainage of the San Juan River. This seems to be the center of development in the ancient prehistoric civilizations of the Southwest.”

But the lacuna of information on this archaeologically rich canyon leaves us, today, with the following questions:

• What happened to the story of the Ancient Puebloan people who lived in Canyon del Muerto?
• How do the remains of the people who were living and dying in del Muerto inform the narrative about the lives of those living in the region?
• In what ways did the interrelationships of communities throughout the region?

What can we learn from adding this rich piece of the archaeological landscape into the conversation about the ancient Southwestern?

THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

For over the last 300 years the American Southwest has been explored, excavated, hosted, and in the end constructed into bounded areas of public lands, reservations (government lands), and private allotments. From the mid 1800s as the field of archaeology evolved so did interest in this region, with different institutions (American Museum of Natural History, Carnegie Institute, and state agencies, to name a few) as well as private parties looking for knowing what and who explored and to what extent the artifacts and archaeologists alike. The early 1890s saw a flurry of activity with expeditions looking for sites and putting their claims on files throughout the nation. Early “discovery” became an unspoken rule and the more one “discovered” and organized to excavate the more notorosity and support the different teams of archaeologists were able to garner.

As larger sites and more artifacts were being excavated it became clear that while some were working towards the “preservation,” “display,” and “study” of the ancient past, others were coming to the Southwest for their own personal gains, resulting in the destruction of sites solely to extract artifacts and bodies. In response to this and in an effort to protect any “prehistoric ruin or monument, or any object of antiquity situated on lands owned or controlled by the Government of the United States...” the American Antiquities Act of 1906 was passed. This put the control of antiquities into the hands of the federal government, instead of exploring freely as the public had done previously by the federal government, thus in order to explore and excavate, permits would be required. But this move also allowed for the destruction of sites solely to extract artifacts and bodies. In 1923 Earl H. Morris, under the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, first visited Canyon del Muerto. He noted in a personal letter to Doctor Wissler, Director of Anthropology at the AMNH, that he had previously been contacted by “skeleto’ s” push for the remains found in the region.

In 1922 the Antiquities Act of 1906 was expanded on the 1906 act to include Arizona state lands and to require that fifty percent of all archaeological and historical materials be excavated by the federal government, in addition the expense of the procedure was now placed in the hands of the site owner. In 1923 Morris wrote then recommends... “confirm our work this season to the portion of canyons de chelly falling in New Mexico and the exploration of all other sites in this state...” This subsequently halted excavations in del Muerto for the 1927 season. While there was one more season of excavation, in 1929, which was fully permitted, and yielded 225 individuals, this summer season did not capture the remains of the people that were living and dying in del Muerto.

Excavations at Canyon del Muerto are conducted first in 1923, and then in 1925, 1929, and 1929, resulting in the assessment of over 65 sites from pre-fire maker into pueblo III. In the Summary Report, Del Muerto Project Season 1925 Doctor Wissler writes “...The skeletal collections resulting from this and previous seasons’ excavations give the general idea of the populations during each cultural stage...” (Andrews 1991:39). Prior to the 1700s this region has a long history of Puebloan occupation spanning the Basket Maker to the pueblo periods (400-1300 AD) leaving behind a rich and relatively unknown, and therefore unexplored, history of occupation. In 1923 Earl H. Morris, under the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), first visited Canyon del Muerto. He noted in a personal letter to Doctor Wissler, Director of Anthropology at the AMNH, that he had previously been contacted by “skeleton” push for the remains found in the region.

While excavations on federal lands were becoming regulated other sites were still fair game. With the Antiquities Act of 1906, Arizona state lands and the Diné (Navajo) were not mentioned in the act and was joined in Canyon del Muerto which span nearly 18 miles, both are semiarid and have unpredictable and low levels of rainfall through out the year and annual flowering from the mountain springs. These lands have been occupied by the Diné since the 1700s and have been considered the “Navajo homeland” providing “...dependable indigenous agricultural base and also a natural refuge that provided potential shelter against enemies...” (Andrews 1991:39). Prior to 1700s this region has a long history of Puebloan occupation spanning the Basket Maker to the pueblo periods (400-1300 AD) leaving behind a rich and relatively unknown, and therefore unexplored, history of occupation.

In 1929 was the last season of excavation at Canyon del Muerto and it was conducted by those connected with the American Museum of Natural History. This is the initial foray into Canyon del Muerto begins 4 years of excavations, discovery, and recovery of sites, artifacts and human remains.

The human remains and artifacts excavated from within Canyon del Muerto still have a story to tell. The rest of this poster will explore my own cursory examination of the human remains, excavated within sites found in del Muerto, curated since the 1920s at the AMNH, and now brought to light as evidence of the importance and complexity of relationships of life, death, and violence that can continue to add to the Puebloan peoples history, and a larger understanding of the life and times in the ancient Southwestern.

DISCUSSION ~ CONCLUSIONS

While not directly related to conflict. Pathologies present in the del Muerto skeletal samples included arthritis, and healed bones, osteomyelitis, ankylosing spondylitis, sacralization, and a number of individuals presented with the fusion of the sacroiliac joint on the right-side. Suggesting long lives, hard work, and possible genetic connections.

Human Remains – pathologies

While the remains of the people that were living and dying in del Muerto inform the narrative about the ancient Southwest? How do the remains of the people that were living and dying in del Muerto inform the narrative about the complexities of life in the ancient Southwest expanding our knowledge of the interpersonal relationships of communities throughout the region?

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CANYON DEL MUERTO

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Relationship to MESA VERDE and CHACO CANYON

While there was one more season of excavation, in 1929, which was fully permitted, and yielded 225 individuals, this summer season did not capture the remains of the people that were living and dying in del Muerto. As noted by Mindeleff: “This is the initial foray into Canyon del Muerto begins 4 years of excavations, discovery, and recovery of sites, artifacts and human remains.”

EXCERPTS FROM PAPER

A number of individuals presented with the fusion of the sacroiliac joint on the right-side. Suggesting long lives, hard work, and possible genetic connections.

The loss of del Muerto into the cabinets of museums and thusly into the annals of anthropological discourse have resulted in a gap in knowledge that might add to the larger discussion of the Antiquities Act of 1906. This is a form of structural violence set forth through legislative acts, and underscored by the ease with which the region was abandoned by anthropologists.

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