May 2012

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

H. Wolcott Toll Ph.D.
Office of Archaeological Studies, Museum of New Mexico, wolky.toll@state.nm.us

Nancy J. Akins
Office of Archaeological Studies Museum of New Mexico, nancy.akins@state.nm.us

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.7275/R51Z429W
Available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol2/iss2/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Landscapes of Violence by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
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

This article is available in Landscapes of Violence: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol2/iss2/8
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 those 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).

Studies excavations at 17 sites recovered 67 human burials and over 3500 pieces of disarticulated bone from two of the communities in the lower half of the valley (Martin et al., 2001). 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 through time areas of denser settlement — communities — occurred in different settings, with particularly favorable ones seeing longer, more intensive use. Heaviest use of those 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 variability within and across these three assemblages shows once again how single cause explanations are unlikely to be valid. The LA 37592 assemblage has many characteristics considered by White (1992) and Turner (1993) to result from intentional relocation process and modern construction activities can account for the LA 37593 disarticulated assemblage. The variability within and across these three assemblages shows once again how single cause explanations are unlikely to be valid. The LA 37592 assemblage has many characteristics considered by White (1992) and Turner (1993) to result from intentional relocation process and modern construction activities can account for the LA 37593 disarticulated assemblage.

LA 37592

LA 37593

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 (308 of 400) are from the fill of one of the eight pit structures at the site. The site was occupied from Pueblo I to Pueblo III. The LA 65030 assemblage comes from the fill of one of these earliest, mid Pueblo II stratigraphic units. Six burials were recorded from the pit structure, 3 of which were intact. The burned roofing layer contained a large quantity of human bone and other artifacts. The three individuals. Disarticulation was exacerbated by mechanical trenching, but was clearly valid. 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 Manchito 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.

LA 37592 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 2235 from this site) representing a larger number of individuals than in the other two assemblages. More are complete elements than in the other two assemblages. Ancestral Puebloans had a much more complex, including cuts and intentional placement of altered elements.

LA 37593

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 bones were present when some were burned. The types of alteration are much more complex, including cuts and intentional placement of altered elements.

LA 65030

Attributes of the disarticulated assemblage at LA 65030 are intermediate in frequency compared to the two later sites. Carvings certainly contributed to the breakage in the fill of that structure, and redeposition damage 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 Manchito 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.

Three assemblages at three sites account for a majority of the disarticulated human remains. Each site assemblage represents a different time segment through time areas of denser settlement — communities — occurred in different settings, with particularly favorable ones seeing longer, more intensive use. Heaviest use of those areas was in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (mid Pueblo II to early Pueblo III). The variability within and across these three assemblages shows once again how single cause explanations are unlikely to be valid.

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 disarticulation and burning, but it has far less evidence of violent battering and mutilation than those from Manchito. Postcranial elements are particularly well represented, with relatively few cutting flakes. The twenty 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.

The LA 37593 assemblage has many characteristics considered by White (1992) and Turner (1993) to result from intentional disarticulation and burning, but it has far less evidence of violent battering and mutilation than those from Manchito. Postcranial elements are particularly well represented, with relatively few cutting flakes. The twenty 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.

The LA 37592 assemblage has many characteristics considered by White (1992) and Turner (1993) to result from intentional disarticulation and burning, but it has far less evidence of violent battering and mutilation than those from Manchito. Postcranial elements are particularly well represented, with relatively few cutting flakes. The twenty 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. These assemblages defy simplistic explanation. The LA 37592 assemblage has many characteristics considered by White (1992) and Turner (1993) to result from intentional disarticulation and burning, but it has far less evidence of violent battering and mutilation than those from Manchito. Postcranial elements are particularly well represented, with relatively few cutting flakes. The twenty 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.