The Blessing and the Curse of Taphonomic Processes: A Bioarchaeological Analysis of a Shaft Tomb from La Florida, Mexico

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**Recommended Citation**


DOI: 10.7275/R59G5JRJ

Available at: [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol2/iss2/6](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol2/iss2/6)
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Abstract
The discovery of an unlooted shaft tomb in Southern Zacatecas, Mexico, offered an undisturbed example of this mortuary tradition common in West Mexico during the Formative and Early Classic eras (300 B.C. to A.D. 400). However, 2000 years of taphonomic processes took their toll on the tomb’s contents. This paper reviews archaeological and ethnographic resources for understanding these taphonomic processes and the excavation techniques that preserved as much data as possible. We focus on four skeletons from the tomb: two individuals joined by a shell belt and the two adjacent individuals who held atlatls in their hands.

Keywords
shaft tomb, Western Mexico, taphonomy

Author Biography
This poster was presented at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology

This article is available in Landscapes of Violence: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol2/iss2/6
The minimum number of individuals (NIH) was determined by the number of crania; there are also isolated post-craniom remains that were not assigned ID numbers in the field. Identification of distinct individuals was complicated by the intermingled position of many of the burials. Some individuals were buried in a supine position, some were flexed in an sides, and some were laid in a prone position. By the second half of the excavation they needed to work more quickly to meet their deadline. In addition, the crew discovered more individuals in the first half of the excavation, so they were not able to work as meticulously or expose an entire skeleton before removing elements.

The survey nature of the excavation forced the excavators to make choices about how to quickly and accurately record information. A decision was made to take as many photographs as possible and record measurements for the placement of remains and objects within the tombs. However, the excavators did not have time to create maps or make drawings while excavating, nor were they able to expose the full contents of the tombs prior to removing the skeletal remains and objects of material culture.

The dense, rocky nature of the soil made it difficult to remove skeletal remains and objects intact. The skeletal remains frequently cumbered with any attempt to remove them from the subaqueous environment. In some instances excavators removed entire crania or other segments of bodies in the soil in the hopes of keeping the remains and associated objects intact for analysis at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Several of the crania were fractured by a large rock sitting on top. It is suspected these rocks were deposited as a result of the roof of the shaft tombs collapsing some years ago.

Osteological Analysis

**I.12 and I.14**

- **I.12 and I.14** were buried in T12 in a supine position side by side near the center of the tomb. These two individuals were placed adjacent to I.16 and I.17, I.12 and I.14 each appear to have been buried holding on at each other.
- The two pieces of the holder associated with I.14 were placed so that the left hand of I.14 was placed against the two pieces of the broken stone holder for both skulls were broken.
- I.12 and I.14 were separated, with one portion close to the body and another portion positioned some distance away. Both were carried away by rilling and falling water.

**I.1.6 and I.17**

- **I.1.6 and I.17** were both buried in a supine position near the entrance of T12, with I.16 positioned slightly on top of I.17. A shell belt was wrapped around the waist of the two individuals, joining them together.
- The cranium for I.16 was removed in the matrix, limiting osteological observations. All three teeth of the mandible were lost, with complete extraction. This individual features a very prominent occipital prominence but no other traits were identified as being able to be observed. No trauma or pathologies were observed.
- I.17 appears to be a 15-30 year old individual, and all teeth show more significant wear than those associated with I.16. Pre-adult I.17 appears to be a male. No trauma or pathologies were observed for either I.17 or I.16.

**I.16 and I.17** featured a higher number of associated objects than any other adults. Numerous diad beads, a pendant, and a number of diad beads and a pendant were associated with these burials.

**Conclusion**

The salvage excavation of T12 demonstrates how taphonomic processes can render a site extremely challenging to excavate. Cycles of rising and receding water and the ceiling collapse scattered the contents of the tomb, deposited rocks, fragmented remains and objects, and compacted the soil around the remains and object. However, these difficult conditions likely prevented the tombs from being looted like T11, leaving a rare example of an intact shaft tomb in this region of West Mexico.

**Acknowledgments**

Peter Jiménez and the staff of the Tuel Archaeological Research Facility; Dr. Ventura Pérez; Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.