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

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

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

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**INTRODUCTION**

Two shaft tombs near Valparaíso, Zacatecas, Mexico (referred to as the “La Florida” tombs), were brought to the attention of the Anthropology at Texas A&M University, San Antonio (INAH) officials in 2009 after local residents noticed that one of the tombs had been looted. When INAH archaeologists (including courtois et Solar) returned to the site they discovered human skeletal remains scattered on the ground near the entrance to the looted tomb. INAH archaeologists then contacted the local archaeological program to secure permission to salvage the contents of the looted tomb and the unlooted second tomb.

**Excavation**

Both tombs were excavated by INAH archaeologists under the direction of Solar. The first tomb (TT1) was buried with dry soil. It is likely the looters chose to open this tomb because the dry soil made it easier to dig. Excavation of this tomb took place over two days and revealed highly fragmented human skeletal remains (likely due to the use of heavy tools by the looters) and few objects of material culture.

The second tomb (TT2) was directly adjacent to the first with a shared wall between the two. This adjacent placement is unusual for shaft tombs in this region. According to local residents the area around TT2 had been the site of a fixed occupation for many years as the tomb would be flooded with water for an extended period of time each year. While the water may have helped protect the skeletal remains and objects of material culture, it also caused the cycles of rising and falling water over the years scattered many of the smaller bones and objects around the tomb, making identification of distinct individuals (and their associated burial items) difficult.

**Osteological Analysis**

1. **I.12 and I.14** were both buried in a supine position near the entrance of TT2, with I.16 positioned slightly on top of I.17. A shell was wrapped around the waist of the two individuals, joining them together.

2. **I.16 and I.17** were both buried in a supine position inside of TT1. TT1 was a site that was being looted like TT1, leaving a rare example of an intact shaft tomb in the region of West Mexico.

**Conclusion**

The salvage excavation of TT2 demonstrates how taphonomic processes can render a site extremely challenging to excavate. Cycles of rising and receding water and the resulting collapse of the tombs’ ceilings caused the contents of the tomb to disperse, leaving the looters with scattered skeletal remains and objects, compacted the soil around the remains and objects. However, these difficult conditions likely prevented the tomb from being looted like TT1, leaving a rare example of an intact shaft tomb in this region of West Mexico.

Initial osteological analysis revealed few conclusions regarding the health, social status, age, and sex distributions for this population. The burial composition of I.12, I.14, and I.16 suggests that these four individuals were engaged out of a distinct burial style. Further research could potentially reveal if the individuals buried in this tomb were genetically related or if they arrived from the same geographical location, among other questions.