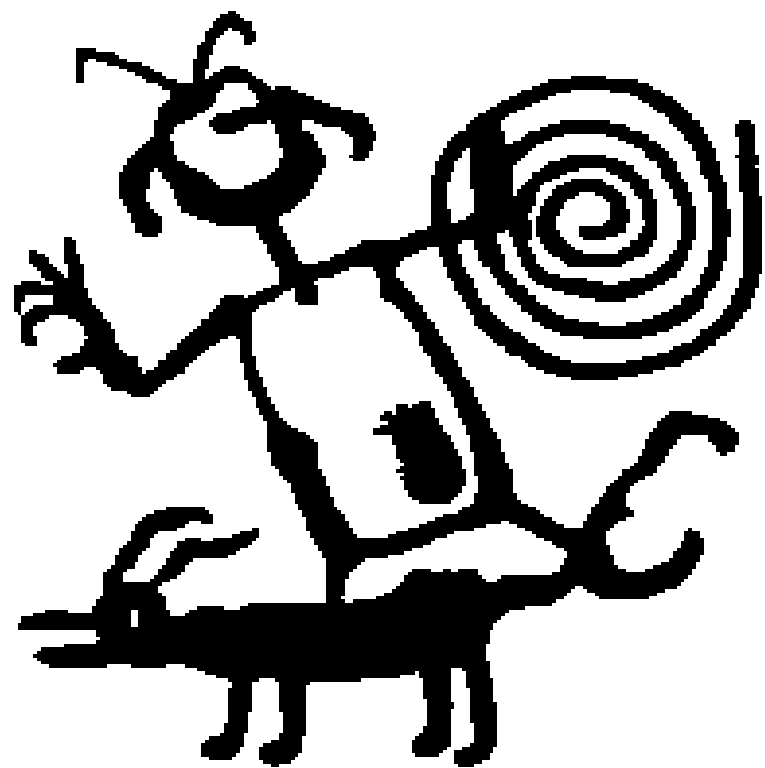


## Contextualizing Death and Trauma at Canyon del Muerto

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# Contextualizing Death and Trauma at Canyon del Muerto

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## 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.

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this poster is to explore the Canyon del Muerto region and to uncover why the significant archaeological finds and human remains found here in the 1920s are not included in the discourse on the ancient Southwest. By employing human taphonomy defined by Nawrocki (1991:1) 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 impacted 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 quietly shape the course of Southwest archaeology. Most notably Arizona Public Law chapter 69 § 2917 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 unstudied, 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 Chacoan and Mesa Verdean complexes.

Clearly Canyon del Muerto presents a geographically important position in the Ancient Southwest. This suggest 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.

(E.H. Morris, report on *The del Muerto Project*, June 14<sup>th</sup> 1929)

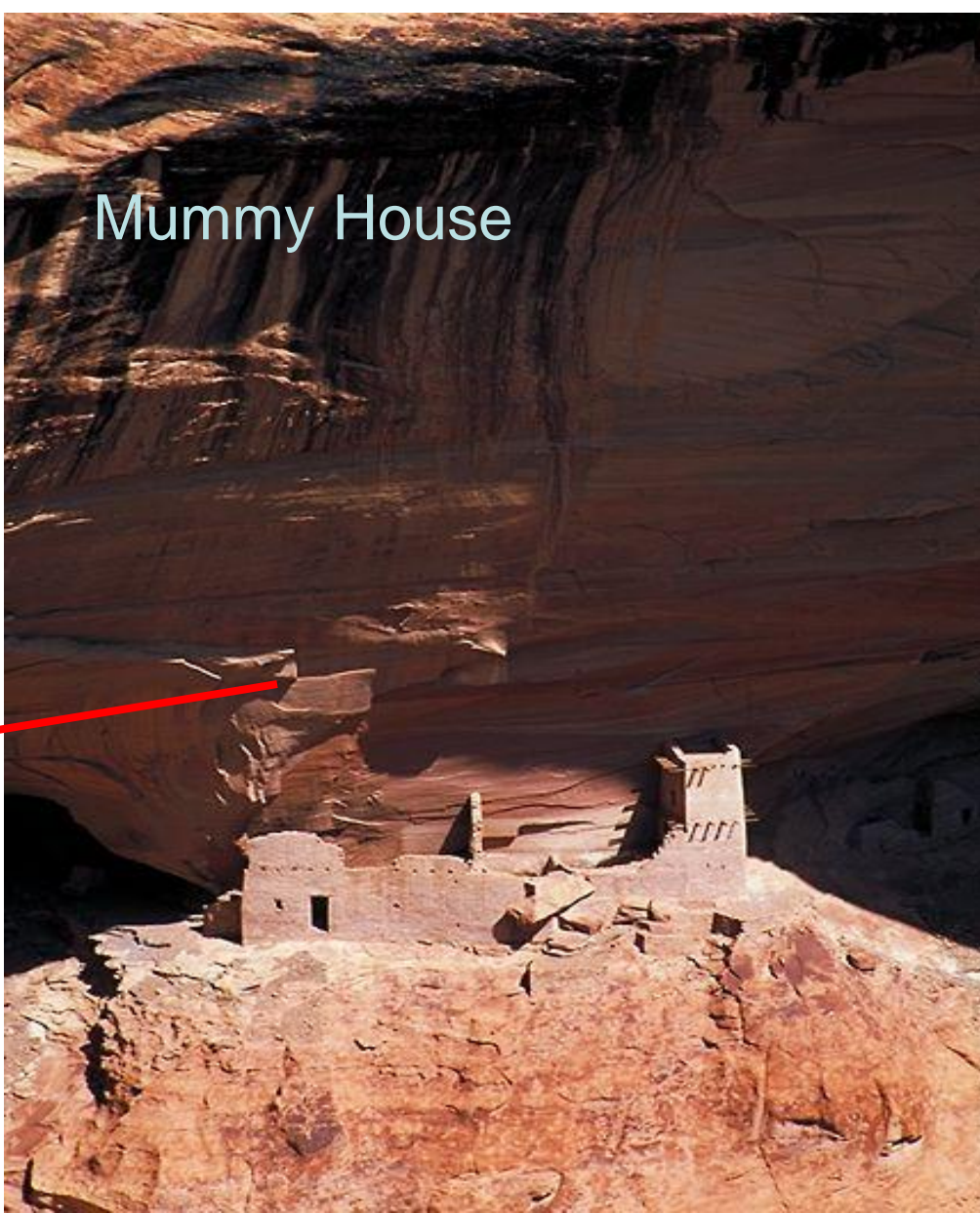
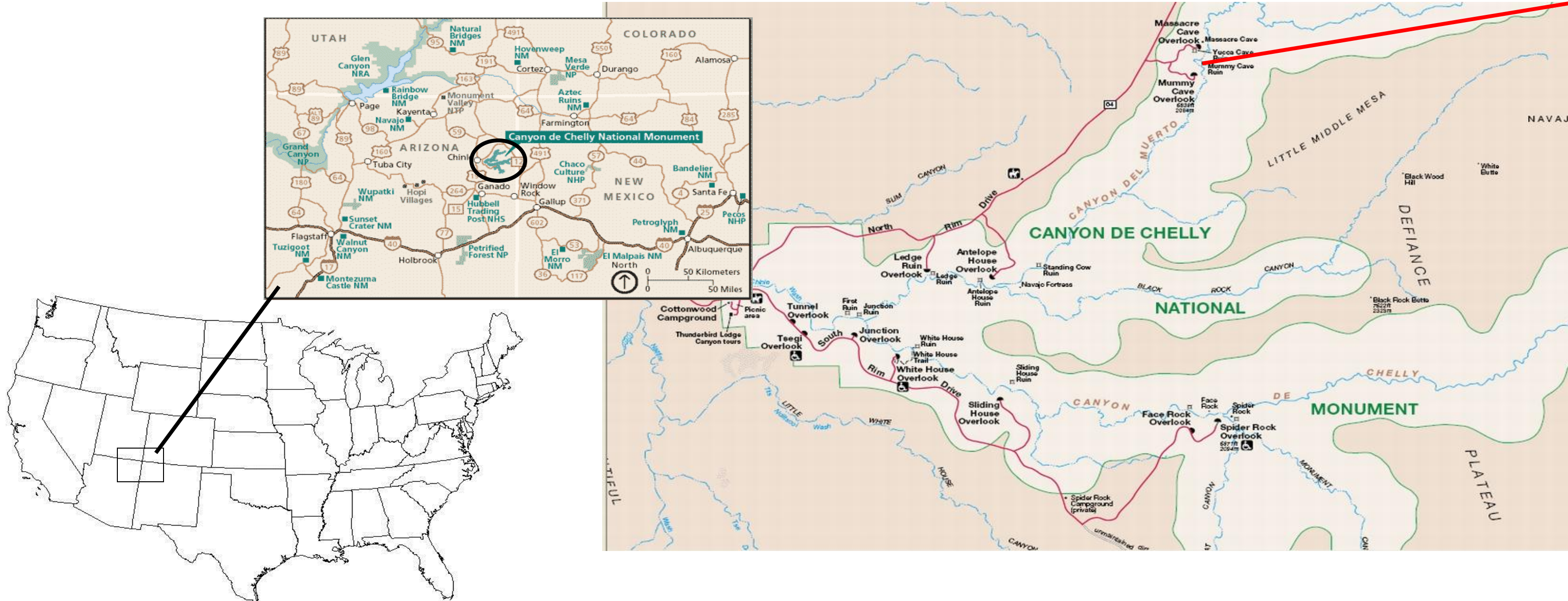
But the lacuna of information on this archaeologically rich canyon leaves us, today, with the following questions:

- *What happened to silence the story of the Ancestral Puebloan people who lived in Canyon del Muerto?*
- *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?*
- *What can we learn from adding this rich piece of the archaeological landscape into the conversation about the ancient Southwest?*

## THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

For over the last 300 years the American Southwest has been explored, excavated, looted, 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 collectors the competition and the desire for knowledge drew explorers and archaeologists alike. The early 1900s saw a flurry of activity with expeditions looking for sites and putting their claims on finds throughout the area. First “discovery” became an unspoken rule and the more one “discovered” and organized to excavate the more notoriety 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 shifted the ownership of antiquities from that of the finder to being controlled by the federal government, thus in order to explore and excavate, permits would be required. But this national act only addressed federal lands, lands not under federal jurisdiction remained open, and there also lacked a means of enforcement. In addition this new law seemed mostly to focus on large recognized sites such as those at Mesa Verde, which had become attractions to the larger public as well.



Mummy House

## Legislating Archaeology ~ Structural (Indirect) Violence

While the American Antiquities Act of 1906 sought to preserve sites on federal land it was 20 years later that the state of Arizona decided to pass its own legislative act. The Arizona Antiquities Act of 1927 (chapter 69 § 2917) expanded on the 1906 act to include Arizona state lands and to require that fifty percent of “...all articles, implements, and material found or discovered by...investigation, exploration or excavation, to be deposited with some public museum in the state.” The passing of this law resulted in the shifting of exploration, investigation, and ultimately excavations and subsequent preservation of sites and their corresponding archaeological and human remains by non-Arizona based institutions to move out of the state completely.

§ 2917. Archaeological discoveries; permit to explore; penalty for violating. Any person making investigations, explorations or excavations in or on the pre-historic ruins, ancient burial grounds, fossilized foot prints, hieroglyphics, and all other archaeological features of Arizona, either on federal or state lands, shall donate to the state fifty per cent of all articles, implements and material found or discovered by such investigation, exploration or excavation, to be deposited with some public museum in the state. Before any exploration or excavation in or on any pre-historic ruins or archaeological working in Arizona shall be undertaken a permit shall first be obtained from the archaeological branch of the university of Arizona and from the board of supervisors of the county wherein the same is to be undertaken. Any person violating this section shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and forfeit to the state all articles and material discovered by or through his efforts, and shall also be fined not exceeding five hundred dollars and imprisoned in the county jail not exceeding six months. (§ § 1-2, Ch. 65, L. '27, cons. & rev.)

This dramatic exodus out of Arizona for archaeological inquiry meant that the work in del Muerto, conducted by those connected with the AMNH, ceased as did any real focus on the materials collected and curated over the previous years of excavations. In fact with only 3 publications from 1938 to 1948, all focused on Mummy Cave and one mummy bundle (Morris 1938, 1941, 1948), Canyon del Muerto and its place in the narrative of the American Southwest and Puebloan history was virtually set aside, and no longer relevant to the larger discourse. Disconnecting this region with its past, and in essence losing the potential to understand the larger interrelationships of communities, and the deep-rooted connections of Puebloan culture to the region. In turn the Diné solidified their stewardship of the land, and the Puebloan people lost their direct connection, furthering the myth of the Anasazi and echoed in the words of the Navajo regarding the cliff dwellers of Canyon del Muerto, as noted by Mindeleff:

“...if asked what became of the dwellers in the cliffs they will say that a great wind arose and swept them all away” (1895:174).

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 Ancestral Puebloan Southwest, 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.

## Canyon del Muerto (& Canyon de Chelly)

While excavations on federal lands were becoming regulated other sites were still fair game. With many of the sites across the American Southwest noted by earlier expeditions of travelers, there was much to do. Of particular note were the region comprising the Canyons inhabited by, and known to the Diné (Navajo) as Tsegi and Enatsegi, Canyons de Chelly and del Muerto respectively (Mindeleff 1895). Canyon de Chelly is nearly 27 miles long and is joined with Canyon del Muerto which spans nearly 18 miles, both are semiarid and have unpredictable and low levels of rainfall through out the year with annual flooding from the mountain snows occurring in the spring. These lands have been occupied by the Diné since the 1700s and have been considered the “Navajo ‘heartland’” providing “...dependable indigenous horticultural base and also a natural refuge that provided potential shelter against intruders...” (Andrews 1991:39). Prior to the 1700s this region has a long history of Puebloan occupation spanning the Basket Maker into 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) in New York, first visited Canyon del Muerto. He noted in a personal letter to Doctor Wissler, Director of Anthropology at the AMNH, that while previously he believed the region to be looted by “pot hunters” and other “relic seekers” in fact it presented quite promising prospects for exploration, linking the sites he saw to other major regions directly, including: Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde and La Plata (Morris 1923). This is the initial foray into Canyon del Muerto begins 4 years of excavations, discovery, and recovery of sites, artifacts and human remains.

Excavations at Canyon del Muerto are conducted first in 1923, and then in 1925, 1926, and 1929, resulted in the assessment of over 11 sites from pre-basket maker into Pueblo III. In the *Summary Report, Del Muerto Project Season of 1926* Doctor Wissler writes:

...The skeletal collections resulting from this and previous seasons' excavations give the general idea of the population during each cultural stage...As a result, the Museum now possesses a most unique series of archaeological collections for the San Juan Area (Del Muerto is the center of this cultural area) in existence. Our skeletal collection is also the best.

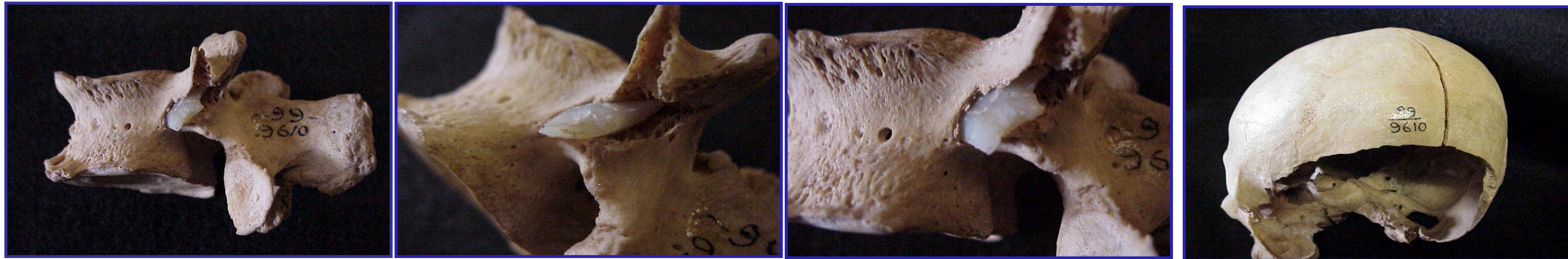
But in 1927 the prospects of continued excavations are cut short as in the June 3, 1927 Memorandum as to the Canyon del Muerto Project for the year 1927 notes the change in law for the State of Arizona. Reflecting on the needs for permits, the heavy fines, and potential imprisonment if these permits are not acquired, the potential for any litigation, and in the end the time-consuming and expense of the procedures now in place. Doctor Wissler then recommends to “...confine our work this season to the portion of Canyon de Chelly falling in New Mexico and the exploration of adjacent burials in that 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 catalogue entries comprising artifacts, mummy's, and skeletal remains. 1929 was the last season of any excavation or discussion of Canyon del Muerto as a place to further the discourse, which one can see is most likely a direct result of the newly instituted Arizona statue: the Arizona Antiquities Act of 1927 (chapter 69 § 2917).

## CANYON DEL MUERTO

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 important and complex interrelationships of life, violence, and death that can continue to add to the Puebloan peoples history, and a larger understanding of the life and times in the ancient Southwest.

## Human Remains ~ (direct) Violence

The American Southwest has been recognized as a region in which conflict was part of the landscape, and evidence of this has been documented repeatedly (Kuckleman et al. 2002, Martin 1997, Nichols and Crown 2008). Human remains can reveal sex, age at death, and something about the occupation, and general health of an individual (Kennedy 1989), while traumatic injuries, healed and perimortem, can often offer a snapshot about direct conflict. Direct violence can be used to strongly infer interpersonal conflict as a cause of death, particularly when the weapon used remains embedded in the bone, or the fracture patterns can be attributed to trauma inflicted upon an individual during life or at the time of death. While the roots of the conflict causing direct violence cannot often not be conclusively determined (Milner 1999) we can begin to examine the larger picture, and includ, types of trauma, healed or not, alongside, placement of burials, grave goods, assessments of the site, and begin to talk about the larger sociopolitical and environmental issues facing the community being examined in relationship to other communities in the same region.



## Human Remains ~ pathologies

While not directly related to conflict. Pathologies present in the del Muerto skeletal samples included: arthritis, broken 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.



## DISCUSSION ~ CONCLUSIONS

### Relationship to MESA VERDE and CHACO CANYON

Much like Mesa Verde, the del Muerto sites are situated in defensive positions, hard to access without being seen. In addition to architecture, there are direct links through pottery and other artifacts suggesting strong ties to Mesa Verde. Like Chaco Canyon the sites at del Muerto are near spring water flow and present the opportunity to grow food, greatly expanding the potential for long-term habitation and relationships with other communities in the region.

### Bringing Canyon del Muerto into the conversation

The addition of Canyon del Muerto into Ancient Puebloan discourse offers an expansion of what we know about the past and reveals another lens with which to think about this region, its people, conflicts, and connections. Today, there is an increased interest in migration patterns and the agriculture arenas of arid land horticulture that are being explored as we try to fully understand the carrying capacity of the land, water usage, and subsistence based agricultural strategies. The intricate and dynamic indigenous agricultural systems that have been documented around the Southwest, most notable are those in the Gila River system, may also be expanded to include the information left behind in Canyon del Muerto and subsequently in use for the last 300 years by the Diné in this region.

In conclusion, while Morris, Kidder, and Wissler all acknowledge the complex relationships between other major sites, and the importance of del Muerto in the narrative, direct analysis has not been undertaken to add data to clarify the connections between del Muerto and the larger sites outside the Arizona boarders, and it is time to incorporate these sites into the conversation.

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