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Nota

## Commentary. Bioarchaeology of Oaxaca: It's all About the People

## Comentario. Bioarqueología de Oaxaca: Se trata de la gente

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Bioarchaeology is clearly all about the people. A human bone, although technically an artifact, is conceptually different than ceramic sherds, lithics, or even animal bones. It is us. The notions of embodiment and culturally-embedded interpretation intersects all the articles in this special issue, where authors take a detailed contextual approach to tackle diverse and complex themes such as mortuary practices, pre- and postmortem treatment, corporeal and skeletal modifications, individual and corporate identities, ethnic affiliation, social memory, violence and interpersonal conflict, trauma, gender and childhood, ancestral veneration, daily activities, nutritional and occupational stress, social organization, social relationships, and local, regional, continental, and global connections.

And while the research presented here is novel and exciting, the ancient Oaxacans were equally fascinated with similar questions and, quite often, invoked the dead for answers. From the onset, as a literate civilization, their writing had focused on people, the human body, and personhood. In fact, the very first known inscription on San Jose Mogote's monument 3 was no other than a personal appellation of a sacrificial victim. Dated to 600 BCE, this makes '1 Eye' the earliest known named individual in the Americas, if not the Western Hemisphere. This anthroponymic trend continued all through Oaxacan recorded history, and further sets it apart from other early Mesoamerican literate societies. Because we can cross-reference named individuals and follow line-

ages through document types and media starting from at least the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, we can now reconstruct elite genealogies which are among the longest ever recorded in the world. In ancient and modern-day Oaxaca, the human body further serves as a corporeal metaphor to anything from lineage to social organization to settlement patterns to entire natural and cultural landscapes (Monaghan, 1994).

Perhaps not surprising then, this embodied and gendered corpus of Indigenous literacy echoes many of the themes that are also discussed within these pages. For example, interpersonal and institutional violence is a recurring leitmotif from the aforementioned San Jose Mogote's monument, through the Middle and Terminal Formative so-called *danzantes* orthostats and 'conquest slabs' in Monte Alban (see also Mayes *et al.*, this issue), the Classic Period narrative programs and the Nuiñe inscriptions, the Postclassic Mixtec codices, and the numerous *lienzos* and *mapas* that are more abundant in Oaxaca than in any other Mesoamerican culture area (see Zborover, 2015 for an overview and relevant literature). These conflicts between people, communities, and polities seem to have been intimately tied to conflicting territorial claims, resulting in a violent legacy that is sadly still endemic to Oaxaca of today.

A quick survey of the Mixtec codices, for instance, shows depictions of dozens of interpersonal conflicts and resulting trauma ranging from spear wounds to the chest, knife stabbing, scaffold sacrifice by arrows, blows to the

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head, heart extraction, and decapitation (the last two surely fatal). Other forms of involuntary and voluntary bodily harm and modifications included limb-binding, nose-piercing, and blood-letting. Females and males are usually easy to distinguish, so we know that it is mostly the latter who are portrayed as involved in these conflicts although it is a female death deity, Lady 9 Grass, who often orchestrates those human agents (Figure 1). There are also a few births depicted, and the pictorial narratives combined with the calendrical dates confirm that some of these individuals died naturally or killed at a young age, tying it back to themes of gendered identities at death (see also Higelin *et al.*, this issue).

Mortuary practices are also a common theme in the codices, and range from formal flexed and extended burials to mortuary bundles; some bundles are shown as interred in the earth, fields, or in constructed compounds alongside offerings, while others in the act of being cremated. Most, however, are shown out in the open (most likely kept in accessible places such as shrines and caves), and as such served as conduits between the living and the dead, the present and the past. This form of ancestral veneration was tied to specific royal lineages and provided a vehicle for political legitimacy and community building in the highly factionalized geopolitical landscape of the Postclassic. Earlier on, the Classic period Zapotecs similarly used personified effigy vessels, many of which carrying calendrical glyphs that may represent deities or ancestors, as an accompaniment to the dead.

The ancient Oaxacans were not just preoccupied with recording cause of death and ensuing rites, but also embedded their writing and practices in postmortem transformations. For the Classic period Zapotecs, mausoleums decorated with genealogical registers served as places for repeated interments, bone curation, legitimacy building, and reflection (Feinman *et al.* 2010; Urcid, 2018; see also Ausel and Faulseit, this issue). The Postclassic Mixtecs, in particular, were fascinated with the concept of skeletonization. Skeletal figures in the codices are shown as piercing mountains, heading to war in full battle regalia, and converse in length with the living (Figure 1); some of these represent deities, spirits, or ancestors, while others impersonated by priests. Disarticulated skulls, mandibles, long bones, and rib cages are commonly depicted framing and decorating vessels, articles of clothing, heavenly bodies, temples, palaces, and mountains, some of which were real places while other metaphorical (Frassani, 2006; McCafferty & McCafferty, 2015; Pohl, 1994). Long bones, possibly human, are also shown reused as bundles, offering, symbols of political authority, and even musical instruments (see also Higelin and Sánchez 2014). For the Mixtecs, bones were not signifiers for the dead but rather possessed “life-giving and life-sustaining qualities” (Furst, 1982, p. 221).

So far, it is probable that none of these hundreds of named individuals commemorated in this millennial historical record have been identified archaeologically (with the likely exception of Lord 5 Flower of the

Zaachila dynasty). Still, much of the above can be tied directly to the archaeological record, either through the study of trauma and other marks left on the bones or the interpretation of funerary rites, including treatment of the dead and associated offerings. The frequent depiction of cremation of recently deceased individuals and mummy bundles in the Mixtec codices indicates that we should be paying closer attention to burned contexts on the macroscopic and microscopic levels (e.g., Duncan *et al.* 2008). And while the Indigenous historical record is mostly concerned with the life and death of specific individuals, their depicted actions often meant to represent the larger population. For example, when Mixtec Lord 8 Deer is repeatedly shown conquering a town by piercing the thoracic cavity of its vanquished ruler with his spear, this is understood to semiotically stand for the armies of thousands of individuals who did the same thing on the actual battlefield.

The historical record also demonstrates how intricate the connections between these people actually were. In fact, if anything it questions the notion of Oaxaca as a homogenous culture area, since the stelae, codices, *lienzos*, and *mapas* clearly show that battles, conquests, marriages, gift exchange, and alliances often crossed ethnic and political lines into regions as distant as the Valley of Puebla and the Basin of Mexico (Fields *et al.* 2012; see also Butler, this issue). Identity in the past was likely community-based and following flexible membership in larger sociopolitical entities, rather than fixed on ethnolinguistic affiliations. Yet, in Oaxaca and elsewhere we are still struggling with ethnonyms that are, for the most part, a simplification imposed by the Spanish Colonial administration on the Indigenous people.

Accordingly, assigning ethnonyms to the osteological, archaeological, and historical records is ever more problematic as it runs the risk of obscuring the intricate mobility of people between regions and fluid identity constructs. And while we have long accepted that raw materials and artifacts traveled well beyond the Oaxacan culture area since the Archaic period and definitely by the Early Formative (Hepp, 2019; Hepp *et al.*, this issue), and later beyond the boundaries of Mesoamerica to connect the American Southwest and Central America (Pohl, 2016), we are only now catching up on (or coming back to?) the notion that Prehispanic people journeyed or migrated long distances as well. During the Spanish Colonial period, Oaxaca became one of the first global hubs to connect the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa (Konwest *et al.*, this issue), so in post-1521 contexts, we should be ready for the possibility of identifying individuals from any of those populations. In such a dynamic environment, recent advances in bioarchaeological methods can surely contribute greatly. As a case in point, the new contextual, chronological, historical, isotopic, and genetic analysis of Monte Alban's Tomb 7 occupants, and especially the possibility that the human ‘donor’ of the famous turquoise skull had originated far in northern Mesoamerica is provocative in its implica-

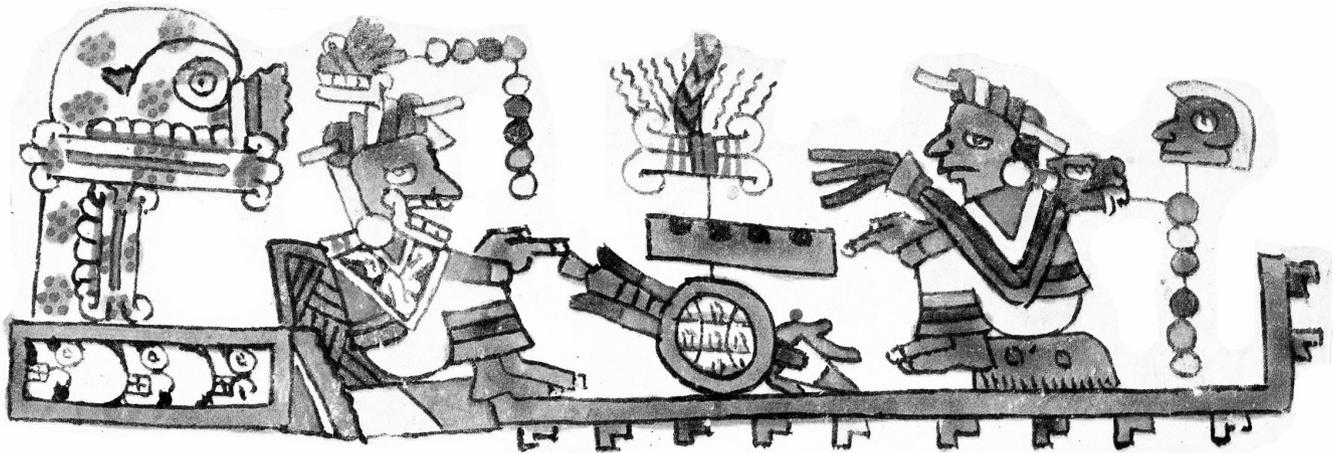


Figure 1. *Skeletal Lady 9 Grass giving council at Temple of Skull; Codex Selden, p. 7*

tions for human mobility in the past (Jansen and Pérez, 2017; see also Granados and Márquez, this issue; and Ortiz *et al.*, this issue).

The Prehispanic historical record is indeed quite useful when it comes to the life and death of the elite, but it is quite limited about what it can tell us regarding the equivalent of today's "99%." This is where bioarchaeology can contribute much, and especially when joining forces with ethnographic observations. While no society is ever frozen in time, it is also quite clear that much of the Indigenous lifestyle and general living conditions in the rural areas had changed only at a moderate pace. For that matter, ethnographic observations today can inform the bioarchaeological record when it comes to health and diet of people in the past, as with such daily activities and trauma that may leave their mark on the bones (e.g., Alfaro *et al.* 2017). As further illustrated by Gallegos and Ramón in this issue, other meaningful symbolic references can be gleaned through ethnographic documentation. Poignant new frontiers are being explored on conceptions of funerary practices among transnational Oaxacan communities in urban spaces (Gutiérrez and Alonso, 2019).

But the people and communities with which we work are not simply a mine for data. In many cases they are also the direct descendants of the people we dig up, and as stakeholders are entitled to access any information gained from their study (Blakey, 2001; Juengst & Becker, 2017; see also Gallegos and Ramón, this issue). All of us who have worked in Oaxaca will recognize that fascination with which our local field collaborators behold human remains. Some approach it with great reverence, while others with great terror. Very few remain indifferent, and in most cases healthy curiosity takes over. It is crucial, therefore, to ensure that our research results find their way back to the community in physical, written, and visual forms. Generating content on the Oaxacan past in Indigenous languages is particularly a priority. Much knowledge has already been produced in academic

circles and, if anything, this should also be 'repatriated' to the host communities.

For this purpose, we should collectively reflect on how the information presented in this special issue is relevant to the descendants of the people that we study, and how best to make it accessible. Although it is often common practice, handing article imprints or copies of technical reports will simply not do. This is especially true for bioarchaeology, with its robust scientific stance still deeply rooted in positivist frameworks (Blakey, 2001). The jargon-laden content needs to be adapted to the target audience and towards pedagogical ends, but without being stripped of its cultural meaning. The science of it all will especially appeal to the school kids, who are often more attuned to such developments.

Much like the ancient Oaxacans, bioarchaeologists collect skeletons in repositories, order and reorder them according to culturally-defined categories, and consult them to get informed about the past (see also Kakaliouras, 2014). But the people of Oaxaca did not just record genealogy, contacts, conflicts, and mortuary practices for historical purposes alone. For them, these opened a window into ontological preoccupations such as crime and punishment, death and regeneration, life and the afterlife, and one's place in the world. Coming literally face to face with the predecessors, contemporaries, and decedents of these recorded people add much substance to our research, where the conjunction of bioarchaeological studies with historical documents and decedent communities promises to create a more cultural, social, and humanistic-grounded practice.

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