

# Secondary Processing of Human Remains at the Pre-Hispanic Site of Paquimé (Casas Grandes), Chihuahua, Mexico

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## Introduction

The site of Paquimé in Chihuahua, Mexico is one of the most complex communities to develop in the North American desert west. One unusual aspect of the site was the diverse ways that its inhabitants treated human corpses (Di Peso et al 1974; Rakita 2001; Ravesloot 1988). During the height of Paquimé (ca. A.D. 1200 – 1450), many burial features (n=41 of 388 or 10.5%) show evidence of post-mortem processing or manipulation of the skeleton. Many of these features are secondary deposits of corpses, or show evidence of skeletal elements being removed after burial or burial pits being entirely cleaned of skeletal material. Some show extra elements being added to burials, evidence of human sacrifice, and combinations of primarily and secondarily deposited corpses (see description of feature 44-A/L-13 below). Likewise, there is evidence that portions of human remains were being curated for use in ceremonially events including a human calvarium set into the floor of one room, jewelry carved from a human bone, and six human "trophy" skulls. These new forms of corpse processing treatments suggest the ongoing ceremonial importance of some of the deceased individuals of the community. A Geographic Information System (GIS) model was used to examine the spatial distribution of these mortuary practices.



Casas Grandes Pottery



The Medio Period (AD 1200-1475) Site of Paquimé



The Casas Grandes Region



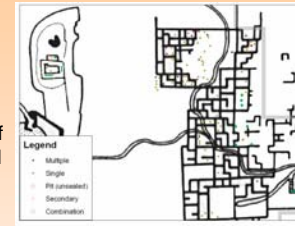
Secondary Urn Burials at Paquimé

## The GIS Model

The base map used in the GIS model was a map of the site of Paquimé that was first transferred into tagged image file (.tiff) format. This file was imported into the ArcMap project and included a graphical representation of non-mortuary ritual spaces identified by Rakita (2001) and marked in green. Map layers including shapes representing the various mortuary features were added to this base map so that they could be displayed or hidden as needed. These shape files (.shp) were created in ArcCatalog. The new shape file layers that were used included ones showing the following funerary characteristics:

- **Burial Type** (multiple or single)
- **Processing Types** (primary, secondary, combination of primary & secondary, body removed, unprocessed),
- **Burial Facility** (undifferentiated pit, sealed pit, unsealed pit, tomb, urn, unburied).

By varying which shape layers were visible, it was possible to subjectively examine the spatial clustering of secondary and extended corpse processing activities at the site and compare them with non-mortuary ceremonial spaces.



GIS Model of Units 4, 6, & 8



Dedicatory Caches Located Under the Floors of a Room at Paquimé



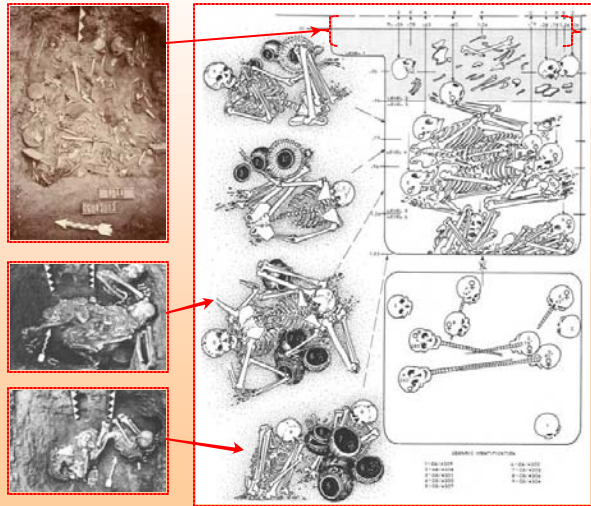
GIS Model & Overhead Photograph of Units 12, 13, & 14

## Conclusions

Examinations of the spatial distribution of secondary burial features at Paquimé using the GIS model suggest the emergence of two distinct sets of ritual activities at the site. This conclusion is supported by previous research (Rakita 2001) that suggested that a dual cult system developed at the site around A.D. 1250-1300. These two ritual systems may represent an Earth/Fertility cult and an Ancestor/Mortuary cult. The GIS model identifies several loci throughout the site of Paquimé that were primary loci of the activities of these cults. The development of these cults occurred concurrently with the emergence of social complexity in the region and further indicates a connection between socio-political complexity and ritual.

## Burial Feature 44-A/L-13

Burial Feature 44-A/L-13 at Paquimé shows the deposition of a combination of primary and secondary human remains into a pit which remained unsealed.

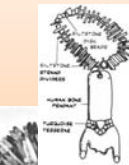


## Objectives

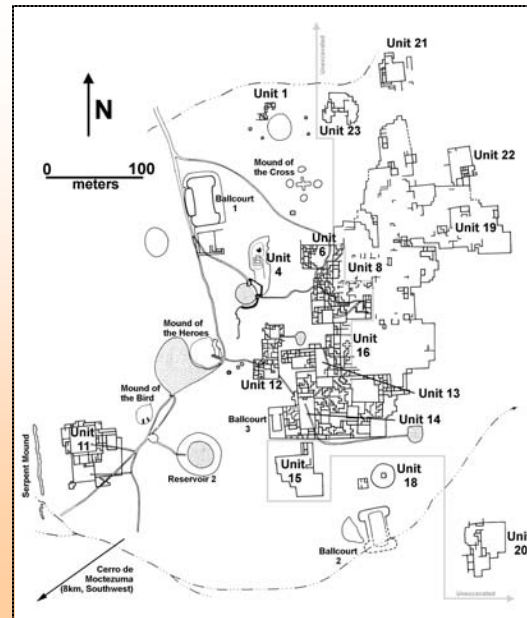
- To examine the spatial dimension of mortuary & other ritual practices at Paquimé.
- To identify loci of secondary and extended corpse processing.
- To determine if secondary and/or extended corpse processing occurred close to recognized ceremonial architecture at the site.
- To determine if secondary and/or extended corpse processing is spatially correlated (negatively or positively) with other ritual activities at the site.



Necklace made from Human Phalanges



Human Cranial Fragment Carved in the Shape of a Hand



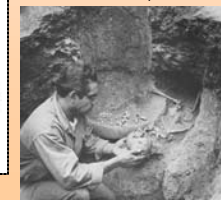
The Medio Period (AD 1200-1475) Site of Paquimé



Burial under the T-Shaped Ballcourt at Paquimé



Mixed Human & Animal Bone Trove at Paquimé



Child Sacrifice at Paquimé

## Results

- Mortuary and non-mortuary ritual activities are scattered across the spatial extent of the site.
- Non-mortuary ritual spaces are identified by ritual deposits that do not include human bone. These are often dedicatory troves or caches (marked by green on the GIS model). These deposits are frequently associated with ceremonial architecture like platform mounds, ball courts, and other ritual spaces.
- There appear to be spatial clusters of secondary and combination (primary & secondary) burials, as well as unsealed burial pits within Units 12 & 13 at the site.
- There appears to be a negative spatial correlation between recognized non-mortuary, ritual spaces and loci of secondary and extended corpse processing.
- While ceremonial architecture is often demarcated by non-mortuary ritual deposits, there is little to no evidence of secondary or extended corpse processing in these areas.

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