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 diversity 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 treatments such as removal of skeletal elements being removed after burial or burials left intact. Likewise, there is evidence that portions of human remains were curated for use in ceremonial 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.

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.

The GIS Model

The base map used in the GIS model was a map of the site of Paquimé that was first transformed into tagged image file (.tif) 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 representing the following mortuary characteristics:

• Burial Feature (primary, secondary, and/or unburied)
• Burial Type (multiple or single)
• Processing Type (primary, secondary, and/or combination of primary & secondary, body removed, unprocessed)
• Burial Facility (unsealed pit, sealed pit, unsealed tomb, tomb, 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.

Results

• Mortuary and non-mortuary ritual activities are scattered across the spatial extent of the site.
• Primary mortuary spaces are identified by deposits that do not include human bones. These are often small deposits of offerings or caches marked by green on the GIS model.
• Secondary and extended corpse processing is not 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) burial features, 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.

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 primarily 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.

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