A Bioarchaeological Study of Late Intermediate Period (AD 1100-1450) Child Sacrificial Victims from the Moche Valley, Perú

Stone Center and Tinker Foundation Summer Field Research Grants for Graduate Students in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Ritual practices involving children have been peripheral to bioarchaeological discussions due to inherent and presumed shortcomings in osteological studies of non-adult skeletal remains. Bioarchaeology, a subdiscipline of biological anthropology, is the study of human skeletal remains from archaeological contexts. I spent the 2018 summer field season conducting bioarchaeological analyses of the human sacrificial victims from the north coast of Peru to assess the feasibility of a dissertation project assessing whether or not the child sacrificial victims were part of an imperial strategy for maintaining hegemony among local and hinterland populations belonging to the Chimú Empire (AD 900-1470). The numerous, well-preserved human skeletons uncovered during this summer’s preliminary field work at the site of Pampa la Cruz and the newly discovered site of El Tablazo will serve as my initiate data for my dissertation project.

Since 2012, the Huanchaco Archaeological Project, directed by Drs. Gabriel Prieto and John Verano, has conducted excavations that have uncovered hundreds of non-adult sacrificial victims from Huanchaquito-Las Llamas and Pampa la Cruz, all located the heartland of the Chimú Empire in the Moche valley, on the north coast of Peru (Goepfert and Prieto 2016: 197). Osteological analyses of the non-adults indicated that the victims exhibit little evidence of nutritional stress or disease. Different forms of cranial modification (annular and tabular erect) suggest that the sample consists of local children from the coast and non-local children from the highlands. The victims were killed with recognizable skeletal evidence of induced death: the sternebrae exhibit peri-mortem cut marks (occurring at or around the time of death) that completely transect the sternum. Radiocarbon dates indicate that the sacrificial victims from Huanchaquito-Las Llamas were deposited between A.D. 1400-1450, a period marking the height of Chimú expansion on the north coast of Peru (Mackey, 1987; Mackey and Klymyshyn, 1990).
I aimed to complete two research goals during the 2018 field season. First, I familiarized myself with the patterning of sacrificial trauma exhibited by the victims that are currently being excavated from the site of Pampa la Cruz. In collaboration with Drs. John Verano and Gabriel Prieto, my second goal was to excavate test units at the newly discovered site of El Tablazo. Our test units revealed three disturbed burials containing non-adult human skeletal remains. Despite the comingled nature of the skeleton, I was able to recover and identify a transected sternebrae from each skeleton. All these individuals exhibit the pattern of violent sacrifice typical of the region and time period.

In addition to the disturbed burials, we uncovered two burials containing complete, articulated skeletons exhibiting transected sternebrae (Photo 1-2). One skeleton was estimated to be between 6-8 years at the time of death. The second skeleton, however, diverges from the known demographic and morbidity pattern known among sacrificial victims in this region. The skeleton exhibit pelvic morphology that indicates the individual was a young adult male. This is the first adult exhibiting this pattern of sacrificial violence ever documented in this region and time period.

The young adult male exhibited a suite of pathological features that are unlike the morbidity pattern known to the child sacrificial victims. There are coalescing foramina with increased thickening on left and right parietal bones and orbits (porotic hyperostosis and *cribra orbitalia*) (Photo 3). The lumbar and thoracic vertebrae of the spine exhibits severe lytic destruction, such as pin-point porosity, penetrating lesions in the vertebral bodies, and lipping on the superior and inferior rims of the vertebral bodies (Photos 4-5). Three of the right ribs (ribs 3-5) exhibit swollen sternal ends (Photo 6), while both tibae are medially bowed. Furthermore, the distal phalanges of the hands and feet exhibit a pattern of destructive lesions known as
“penciling.” Clearly this individual experienced a range of specific and non-specific markers of physiological stress. The cranial porosities, swollen stern rib ends, and bowing of the tibiae are features indicative of nutritional deficiencies during childhood. Bowing tibiae and swollen sternal ribs ends in particular are traits considered to be pathognomonic for vitamin D deficiency, or rickets. The destructive lesions on the spine, hands, and feet is require more research before a differential diagnosis may be completed. It is possible that the lesions were caused by an infectious disease, perhaps tuberculosis, or a malignant neoplastic disease. Motivations for including of this unhealthy individual in a region-wide non-adult sacrificial program merits further excavations at the site of El Tablazo.

These data indicate that I have the sample necessary to carry out archaeological and osteological analyses during the 2019 field season for my dissertation research. I will identify the significance of the site of El Tablazo in the Chimú world and recover human skeletal remains for osteological analysis. The excellent preservation of the remains also indicate that I will be able to conduct biogeochemical analyses of the victims’ preserved dentition, bone, and hair to reconstruct dietary profiles and to identify changes in the victims’ residence throughout life. In sum, this project will combine osteological and biogeochemical analyses to reconstruct the life histories of sacrificial victims from the north coast of Peru. Diachronic analyses of human sacrificial victims has significant implications for understanding the various tactics used by the Chimú Empire to consolidate power over their subjects, including the display of ritual violence through mass sacrificial rituals of children. This project will examine how Chimú imperial policies and practices impacted childhood experiences and ultimately elucidate Chimú motivations for orchestrating in the largest program of child sacrifice known from the prehistoric Americas.
Works Cited


Photos

Photo 1: Transected sternum, young adult male
Photo 2: Transected sternum detail, young adult male

Photo 3: *Cribrat orbitalia*, right orbit, young adult male.

Photo 4: Lytic lesions penetrating the superior vertebral body of lumbar 1, young adult male
Photo 5: Lytic lesions penetrating the right lateral vertebral body of thoracic 2, young adult male

Photo 6: Swollen stern ends of ribs 3 and 4, young adult male