

Reinterpreting Prehistory of Central America

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Fatal Attractions: Interpretation of Prehistoric Mortuary Remains from Lower Central America

Peter S. Briggs

Mortuary remains from pre-Conquest archaeological sites in Lower Central America (see Figure 5.1 for locations mentioned in the text) have been and continue to be an important resource for interpretation and speculation on indigenous world views, religious ideologies, and artistic character. As well, they provide data for analyses of physical remains, stylistic patterns, demographic profiles, and social complexity. Methodological advances — beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to the present — in archaeological analyses of mortuary remains have focused heavily on the relationship between mortuary treatment and social dynamics, most especially the identification of the evolutionary levels of social organization and the degree and character of social complexity. My interest here is to survey the impact of this latter direction in mortuary analysis on our interpretations of prehistoric Central America by focusing on Panama and Costa Rica. I will not attempt a comprehensive review of all of the recently published literature relevant to this undertaking but will cite specific studies that are both accessible and exemplary.

The archaeological literature pertaining to social analysis of mortuary remains has been substantial and, fortunately, several reviews have thoroughly traced the relevant theoretical and methodological contributions, among them Ucko (1969), Tainter (1978), Bartel (1982), and O'Shea (1984). Recently, Buikstra (1990) sounded an encouraging call for prelimi-

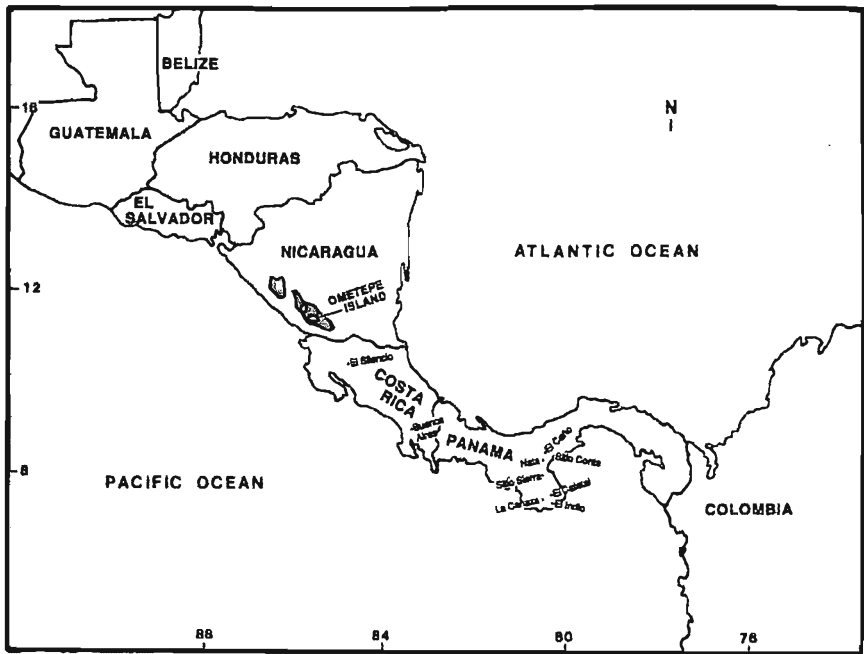


Fig. 5.1. Map of Central America.

nary discussion on re-evaluating the current paradigms in this field of study. The advances in the interpretation of mortuary remains have been met with uneven interest by scholars of Lower Central American prehistory. My emphasis here, therefore, will be to bring critical attention to general trends in recent analyses of Central American mortuary remains. Such an endeavor in a short space has the unfortunate impact of de-emphasizing the progressive research that is ongoing in Central America in favor of highlighting problematic approaches. I will not avoid this circumstance, but I do wish to compensate by bringing attention toward the end of this chapter to research that has the potential of substantially contributing to a fuller understanding of prehistoric Central American peoples, especially the dynamics of their art and society, through mortuary analyses. All related efforts in this region of the world will, ultimately, require focused analyses of mortuary remains; therefore, anything to do with them deserves our scrutiny.

An unfortunate and common circumstance of the archaeological record in Lower Central America is the absence of recoverable human skeletal

remains in what are, arguably, interments. This absence begs a very basic question: if human bones are not present, what are the criteria used to identify a mortuary context or interment? At present our response to this dilemma has emphasized an intuitive formulation that focuses on the spatial arrangement of artifacts, stressing either the placement of the artifacts in the site, the arrangement of groups of artifacts, or the location of artifacts one to another (for example, Casimir de Brizuela 1972a, 1972b; Drolet 1986; González 1971; Gutiérrez González 1986; Ichon 1974, 1975, 1980; Lange and Norr 1986). In addition, the discovery of features such as walls, mounds, and floors also serves to define the presence of a mortuary site. The identification of interments in Central American archaeological sites by these criteria seems to produce credible observations, and their collegial acceptance increases as does the congruity of the various criteria.

However, whether used independently or together, these methods of identifying mortuary remains depend heavily on predispositions — certainly informed in most cases by accepted patterns of mortuary treatment — as to what an interment should look like. We are, therefore, at some risk in misidentifying burial facilities. For example, in the excavation of one of the most well-known archaeological sites in Central America, Sitio Conte in Panama, both Samuel Kirkland Lothrop (1937, 1942) and J. Alden Mason (1940, 1941, 1942) encountered great difficulty in discriminating between graves that did not contain human skeletal remains and concentrations of artifacts that they called caches. Whether these assemblages, called graves or caches, were related to the mortuary ritual, to some other ceremonial or economic function, or to a variety of uses has never been satisfactorily resolved. As a result, any subsequent analysis of this necropolis, as an example, must maintain a self-conscious caution in selecting specific finds as representative of Sitio Conte mortuary practices. The identification of any of the artifact assemblages at the site as mortuary remains requires independent and unambiguous evidence.

The lack in the Central American archaeological literature of specific methods to discriminate between mortuary remains that may or may not include skeletal material and noninterments leads to a basic methodological impasse at the moment. To complicate matters, our frequent rush to provide synthetic assessments of Lower Central American social dynamics has led to a dependence on mortuary remains whose status as such is open to question. The continuing importance of mortuary remains to our understanding of Central American prehistory is reason enough to exercise great care in selection of the criteria used to arrive at an unambiguous identifica-

tion of an interment or mortuary site. Our advancement of methodological clarity (for example, Wallace and Accola 1980) will help not only help to evaluate our current assumptions about the character of mortuary practices but, as importantly, help us to avoid ignoring or overlooking previously unexpected aboriginal approaches to the disposal of the dead.

The absence of human skeletal remains shadows interpretive efforts for scholars of Central American mortuary practices in other ways (cf. Blanco V. 1986; Bradley 1984; Norr 1986; Ryder 1986a, 1986b; Vázquez Leiva 1986b). Perhaps the two most crucial variables useful for interpreting the social dimensions of mortuary remains are the age and sex of the interred. The recovery of human skeletons provides no guarantee of identifying these physiological dimensions of the interments, but it is a prerequisite. Differential treatment based on these criteria provide an index, an independent variable, by which scholars can more successfully begin to reconstruct the character of a society's organization. The suspension of our ability to correlate particular types of mortuary programs with age and sex in a specific site severely limits the character of our arguments concerning the social dimensions represented by the mortuary remains and profoundly reduces our ability to distinguish among representations of status, rank, hierarchy, and complexity.

The lack of human skeletal material in many Central American burials is apparently a bias of the "environmental formation processes" (Schiffer 1987) of the archaeological record. In general, this adverse condition befalling Central American sites has been attributed to a combination of highly acidic soil conditions and large amounts of rainfall, which hasten deterioration of human bone. With present recovery technology we seem to have little ability to overcome this bias. However, we cannot yet reject the possibility that "cultural formation processes," following Schiffer (1987), may also have affected the deterioration or preservation of human bone in these sites. Why, for example, is there a marked difference in the recovery of animal bone and human bone from Sitio Conte in Panama? Is it simply a difference in the physical structure of the types of bone, a bias of the field techniques, or a result of different treatment of the remains prior to burial, the latter being a situation that may be suggested by the historical records? We do not yet know. Indeed, the formation processes of pre-Conquest mortuary remains, especially relating to human and other animal bone in Central America, deserve more analytical attention so that we can begin to address many of our most fundamental questions. Recent advancements

certainly suggest that we can find relevant data for the inquiries (Norr 1990; cf. Vázquez Leiva and Weaver 1980).

Human bones are, arguably, the most useful independent variable for inferences regarding social, demographic, dietary, pathological, and related characteristics of past societies. Lacking the presence of skeletal material, some studies of Central American mortuary remains have developed interpretations of prehistoric social dynamics relying most strongly on the artifact assemblages identified as mortuary remains. An imperative to provide social inferences primarily and, at times, exclusively from these artifacts has had significant consequences.

Among several of the studies of mortuary artifacts, it is assumed that the quantity and quality of mortuary furnishings represent an absolute measure of the complexity of the society from which the remains originated (for example, Snarskis 1979, 1985; Zilberg 1986). That is, if one is confronted with a few, unspectacular mortuary goods in a simple grave, the social complexity of the society as a whole can be characterized as low, or in social evolutionary terms as an egalitarian or tribal group (following Service 1970 and Fried 1967). Similarly, if one encounters a grave in which the goods include many elaborate polychrome ceramics, gold figurines, and hard stone carvings, among other things, the complexity of the society, it is argued, is in general high, perhaps either a chiefdom or state.

This particular argument, perhaps simplified here, is especially attractive in situations where the mortuary sample from a particular site is quite small or when the data originate from isolated interments located in different sites. Under these conditions, broad comparative analyses and recovery of a full complement of mortuary treatments cannot be accomplished, and the researcher must assume that the recovered mortuary artifacts are regionally and temporally undifferentiated and are independent criteria for the measurement of social complexity.

The assumption that there exists an identifiable relationship between the complexity of the mortuary remains and the society that created them seems justifiable. As noted by Binford in one of the more important studies of mortuary analyses, "the form and structure which characterizes the mortuary practices of any society are conditioned by the form and complexity of the organizational characteristics of the society itself" (1971:125). However, the identification of a general scale of complexity in a mortuary program as a reflection of the complexity of a social organization does not produce reliable inferences when either the intervals on the scale are

unknown or when those things being measured are independent of one another, for example in time or space.

The implied isomorphism between simple graves or interments and less complex societies is also inaccurate. To put it as bluntly as possible, a measurement of the type of artifacts or the number of artifacts from a discrete mortuary context is not an independent measurement of social complexity. From comparative studies we know that simple or less complex societies (in the evolutionary sense, egalitarian or tribal groups) do not dispose of their dead in panculturally uniform practices. Treatments range from the obviously simple practice of abandonment of a corpse at the place of death to elaborate modification of the skeleton followed by interment with precious artifacts. Similarly, a single interment in a state society may be just as simple as or more complex than these examples. There are, as a result, no universal qualitative or quantitative criteria that, when applied to any one mortuary unit, can provide a means to identify the complexity or level of organization of the society that undertook the interment.

More specifically, a comparison of modern U.S. Army mortuary practices with those of Sitio Conte in Panama provides a provocative example of this point. Recognition of military ranks in the U.S. Army is extremely parsimonious, consisting primarily of minor changes in uniform style and among a modest array of metal and cloth emblems. Among the army burials, material expressions or indications of rank have little quantitative variation. At the prehistoric Sitio Conte, however, elaborate displays of rank include accumulations in a single grave of many thousands of artifacts manufactured from a wide variety of materials and enhanced with different designs. Following the above argument, we should conclude that a U.S. Army grave represents, in general, a lower level of social complexity compared to the society that created any one of the graves in the Sitio Conte necropolis. This is not a realistic expectation; the army graves represent a rigidly stratified subpopulation of a massive state organization far more complex than the society that created Sitio Conte. Essentially, the variability under consideration must be circumscribed by its historical boundaries. The identification of the form and structure of the mortuary practices of a society demands that we obtain archaeologically the range of treatments produced by the society under study (O'Shea 1984).

The variability in the numbers and qualities of mortuary furnishings also requires substantive independent measurements with which to be compared. As emphasized above, a minimum expectation is age and sex; data also on the position, deposition, orientation, pathology, and related

criteria prove quite useful. As the data are analyzed and compared one with another, we might derive information suggesting that particular complexes of artifacts from a reliable site sample do represent various social dimensions. Such a conclusion, not an *a priori* assumption, has rich consequences for reconstructing the mortuary expressions of social organization and structure represented at a particular site and in a specific interment. We might, for example, be able to identify particular stylistic characteristics of mortuary treatment that not only have temporal and spatial but social significance as well.

A parallel line of reasoning argues that the interred population at a site reflects the size of the living population. That is, if a cemetery or other burial facility was small both in the physical area it covered and in the number of interments it yielded, then the associated village or habitation area was also small (for example, Bradley 1984; Lange 1980; Snarskis 1979). Reliable samples of interments can provide useful and predictive information on mortality rates, birth and death rates, and age or sex distributions of a population at large. In addition, the number of interments located at a particular village may provide, with some statistical massaging, the minimum number of individuals who inhabited that village at a single time. However, to the best of my knowledge the absolute size or range of a population cannot be readily estimated or inferred from either the size of the mortuary area or the number of interments. Far too many variables, such as differential burial treatment, death and interment away from the village, and biased recovery of human skeletal remains, undermine such an argument.

Underlying this discussion so far is the unavoidable fact that analyses of Central American mortuary remains face a substantial sampling problem — a ubiquitous thorn in most archaeological research and one that is generally ignored by art history. I do not have any convenient formulas to determine a reliable mortuary sample size for an analysis of a given population. On the other hand, there are good reasons to suggest that some of our existing samples from Central American mortuary sites are neither representative nor adequate to warrant use as a foundation for testable interpretations.

Some of the problems that stem from an inadequate sample size are embedded in our attempts to reorganize limited data collected under cultural historical paradigms for service in behavioral-oriented interpretations (for example, Guerrero M. 1986). Until recently, interest in the mortuary remains of prehistoric Central America has centered on defining the historical and cultural characteristics of mortuary practices on a regional basis. Such

a strategy tended to emphasize similarities in mortuary programs that might be used to establish the geography of cultural areas and stylistic time lines, or seriations of mortuary practices. This has encouraged the formation of broad areal comparisons — similar to ceramic studies — of mortuary samples from discrete archaeological sites in order to characterize those mortuary patterns having chronological and spatial significance.

Often due to the lack of other data bases, Central Americanists also have tended to use areal samples of mortuary remains as the analytical unit for developing inferences concerning social organization or structure (for example, Briggs 1989). Although the use of such a sample may or may not be a valid indicator of temporal and spatial patterns, its retrofitting for use in social analyses should be undertaken with awareness of its limitations. From a very practical point of view, the site-specific recovery and precise description of a large sample of mortuary remains may provide an adequate data base for a social analysis, whereas a data base that features few or isolated mortuary remains from different sites in a prescribed area will, in general, prove less than satisfactory.

For example, among the mortuary remains from the temporally and spatially proximate sites in Los Santos province of central Panama, El Indio (Ichon 1974, 1975, 1980), La Cañaza (Ichon 1974, 1975, 1980), and El Cafetal (González 1971), particular stylistic and technical aspects of mortuary furnishings are similar: the ceramic types, for example, fit the expected cultural-historical parameters. These similarities have temporal significance. However, the distribution among the interments of artifacts, emblematic designs on the artifacts, and other discrete displays of relative status vary substantially from site to site and independently of the temporal markers. As a result, an arbitrary or random mix of mortuary remains from different villages or sites that share a geographic region, temporal niche, or technological level and that is formulated as a regional sample would not necessarily indicate differences in the expression of social dimensions expressed as changes in the mortuary furnishings. Even more relevant to Lower Central America, I suggest that those characteristics of mortuary practices that tend to be more socially loaded, that is, those providing more support for inferences on social dynamics, are also more site specific, that is, specific to one discrete social or corporate unit. Ultimately, this may be a function of social complexity and territoriality, and if it is, many of our broad areal generalizations based on typological similarities relating to dimensions of space and time may not be accurate reflections of either regional or site-specific social, economic, and ideological dynamics.

Moreover, the prevalent use of regionwide, as opposed to site-specific, samples of mortuary remains in many of our studies is an unsatisfactory method for establishing the range of mortuary behaviors useful for social reconstructions. Recent work on Panamanian burials has demonstrated that the quantity or quality of artifactual mortuary remains, the degree of ceremonialism, and the differential distribution of mortuary artifacts are not reliable, regionwide measurements of social complexity (Briggs 1989). Indeed, many of the social inequalities (for example, those associated with task performance, age, and sex) that might be represented by variation either in the number or type of mortuary furnishings among so-called egalitarian societies also are prevalent among more complex, hierarchical social groups. This does not mean, however, that the criteria used in formulating the mortuary programs are uniformly of the same character, number, or breadth. The determination of these criteria requires a mortuary sample that, at a minimum, approaches the range of mortuary treatments of a specific corporate group.

In the search for correlations between mortuary artifacts and social dynamics, some scholars have suggested, both implicitly and explicitly, that qualitative aspects of a mortuary furnishing are an unambiguous indication of the relative status or rank of an interred individual. Similar to other arguments presented here, this line of reasoning suggests that if one uncovers a particular type of artifact in a mortuary context, for example, a hard stone celt, polychrome ceramic vessel, elaborate stone metate, or gold figurine, it corresponds to a particular status that may correlate with a particular level of social complexity or organization (cf. Lange 1984; Snarskis 1984a). This argument, like others noted above, tends to be encountered in those studies based on mortuary data retrieved from interments without human skeletal remains or when the retrieved sample of interments is either small or not representative.

I would like to examine in more detail an example of this reasoning by focusing on gold mortuary artifacts. In this brief exercise, I seek to know if there are any good reasons for us to assume that gold objects were qualitatively superior mortuary artifacts, which independently signified high status among native Central American peoples (cf. Lange and Bishop 1988). Being a skeptic, I suspect that our own dependence on gold as the standard of economic exchange and as a symbol of high status has motivated us to assume that its value among indigenous pre-Conquest cultures is similar, if not the same.

I do not wish to dismiss as inaccurate the sixteenth-century and later Spanish observations of widespread aboriginal use of gold in costume elements, figurines, tools, and sculpture. The accounts related to gold objects and their manufacture from the Andes and Mesoamerica, as well as Lower Central America, are truly impressive (useful summaries can be found in Emmerich 1965; Roosevelt 1979). The plaques, helmets, medallions, beads, and pendants just from the Sitio Conte in Panama, as one example, have for almost a hundred years stunned the modern world in their number and quality. However, we need to justify a conclusion that these native peoples placed a value on gold more or less equivalent to ours, namely a material that indicates high status and rank as well as economic achievement.

The assumption that pre-Conquest gold artifacts were a high-status class of object to the aboriginal Central Americans is not hidden. Creamer and Haas's interpretation of social dynamics among the peoples of Lower Central America, for example, echoes Spanish observations when it notes that in Panama "gold artifacts were the *predominant* indicator of rank as described by the early explorers and as seen in excavated burials" (1985:745, emphasis added); and they continue by concluding that "the presence of gold and specialist-produced ceramic artifacts in burials at Sitio Conte are emblematic of a clear status hierarchy" (1985:745).

In a more recent oral presentation describing the graves found at the site of La Mula, along the Pacific Coast in central Panama, Pat Hansell (1990) proposed that the discovery of a very small number of gold artifacts in one of three graves stood as evidence for the presence in this village of a rigid status system, quite possibly representing ranking. Moving further north, Payson Sheets concluded that the El Silencio cemetery in Costa Rica "was a high status graveyard [as] evidenced by the gold, the Cabuyal Polychrome vessels, the elaborate and thin metates, the impressive earth moving efforts with their fill-retaining walls, and the amount of time people spent visiting the graveyard for post-interment activities" (1984:210).

Cooke and Bray, commenting on the use of gold in Panama, state the matter plainly: "Once introduced, metal objects rapidly became the *primary* symbols of authority in Isthmian society. . . . In life and in death, then, gold was the symbol of rank and prestige" (1985:36, emphasis added; also see Day 1988).

With higher or lower degrees of temperance, such statements demonstrate our assumption that gold artifacts indicate to one degree or another distinct levels of status and high rank. The reasoning when applied to

mortuary remains has an unmistakable circular character to it; but, because of its widespread acceptance and not its form, the argument deserves to be investigated. Moreover, a comparison of regional ethnographic examples advocates for some added skepticism relating to the assumption that the value relative to social status of gold among pre-Conquest Lower Central Americans was uniformly high. Ibarra (1990) has noted that gold ornaments frequently indicated chiefly status among the Talamanca in Costa Rica. Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she points out, Talamancan leaders denoted their chiefly status with gold pendants, often those representing a raptor (or hummingbird) and worn around the neck.

However, among the Cuna of Panama, the situation is quite different. Gold jewelry is and has been commonly worn by women, and in the historic past men donned gold nose rings. Among contemporary Cuna women, gold jewelry acknowledges the ability of a woman to convince a man to buy her such sumptuary objects. This is, certainly, a material recognition of economic success; but this success does not by itself warrant a high status or rank within the community (Salvador 1978; James Howe, personal communication). Although evidence concerning the historic meaning of men's gold nose rings is less clear, they were probably personal items of adornment that had no relation to rank or social status. Howe notes that there is no evidence regarding the disposition of the jewelry on the death and subsequent burial of a Cuna individual. Of consequence, the differences between the Cuna and Talamancans demonstrate that there has been significant variation among Central American native peoples in the use, meaning, and social value associated with gold. Our assumptions respective to the uniform significance of prehistoric gold artifacts (and, I would suggest, other so-called precious artifacts; see, for example, Leibsohn 1988) may, therefore, be met with some caution.

Returning to the archaeological record, if we examine a number of mortuary sites that contain gold artifacts, the interments with gold should unequivocally rise to the top of the status heap. In order to evaluate this proposition, I would like to examine remains from two contemporaneous sites that I have studied previously in some detail, namely graves from the later phase of El Indio excavated by Alain Ichon (1974, 1975, 1980) and those from the Sitio Conte excavated by Lothrop (1937, 1942) and Mason (1940; Briggs 1989).

El Indio (Figure 5.2), located near the tip of the Azuero peninsula on the Pacific coast of Panama, yielded interments from two periods, Phase II (250 B.C.–A.D. 500) and Phase III (A.D. 500–1000). The graves from the

latter period are coeval with Sitio Conte and, therefore, the object of my attention in this brief discussion. Among these interments, I have uncovered forty-nine individuals distributed among forty-two graves. Unfortunately, none of the remains were sexed, but the skeletons were classified by general age grades consisting of children (19 percent), adolescents (53 percent), and adults (28 percent). Unlike earlier interments at the site, the graves were grouped in a well-defined area that was not covered with habitation debris, suggesting that they may have been part of a formal cemetery.

Eighty-eight percent of the graves contained mortuary furnishings. Using four different cluster-analysis algorithms (Statistical Analysis System 1979, 1982), the distribution of mortuary artifacts (measured by their absolute quantities as well as their presence or absence) provided useful information. Adolescent mortuary treatment appears at first to be a bit perplexing; some of the adolescents are treated in ways identical to adults and others in ways similar to children. The perplexity stems, I believe, from the criterion of adolescent. This age grade probably does not reflect the social distinctions being addressed at El Indio. If we collapse adolescents into either adults or children, depending on their treatment, the mortuary practices at the site reflect two distinct and unmistakable patterns related to these age grades.

Adults, including the adult-adolescents, were treated similarly; almost every adult grave contained a decorated jar and plate. Yet, other than these items, the remainder of the grave goods accompanying each interment tended to be idiosyncratic. That is, each adult received at least two ceramic objects, but the distribution of other mortuary goods among their graves followed no strong patterns. Moreover, the absolute number of artifacts in each adult interment was quite small compared to children. Finally, the overwhelming majority of all mortuary furnishings in the adult graves were ceramic vessels that were also similar in shape and style to those found in the graves of children.

Children's graves, including the adolescents who were treated like children, were the richest interments in both the number and variation of mortuary artifacts. They contained the most visually and technically complex objects found among all of the Phase III interments. More of the ceramics found in the children's graves are painted than among the adult burials, and certain objects, especially geometric and frog- or toad-shaped shell pendants (Figure 5.3) and beads, were associated exclusively with child burials. The strong pattern reflected in the distribution of these shell

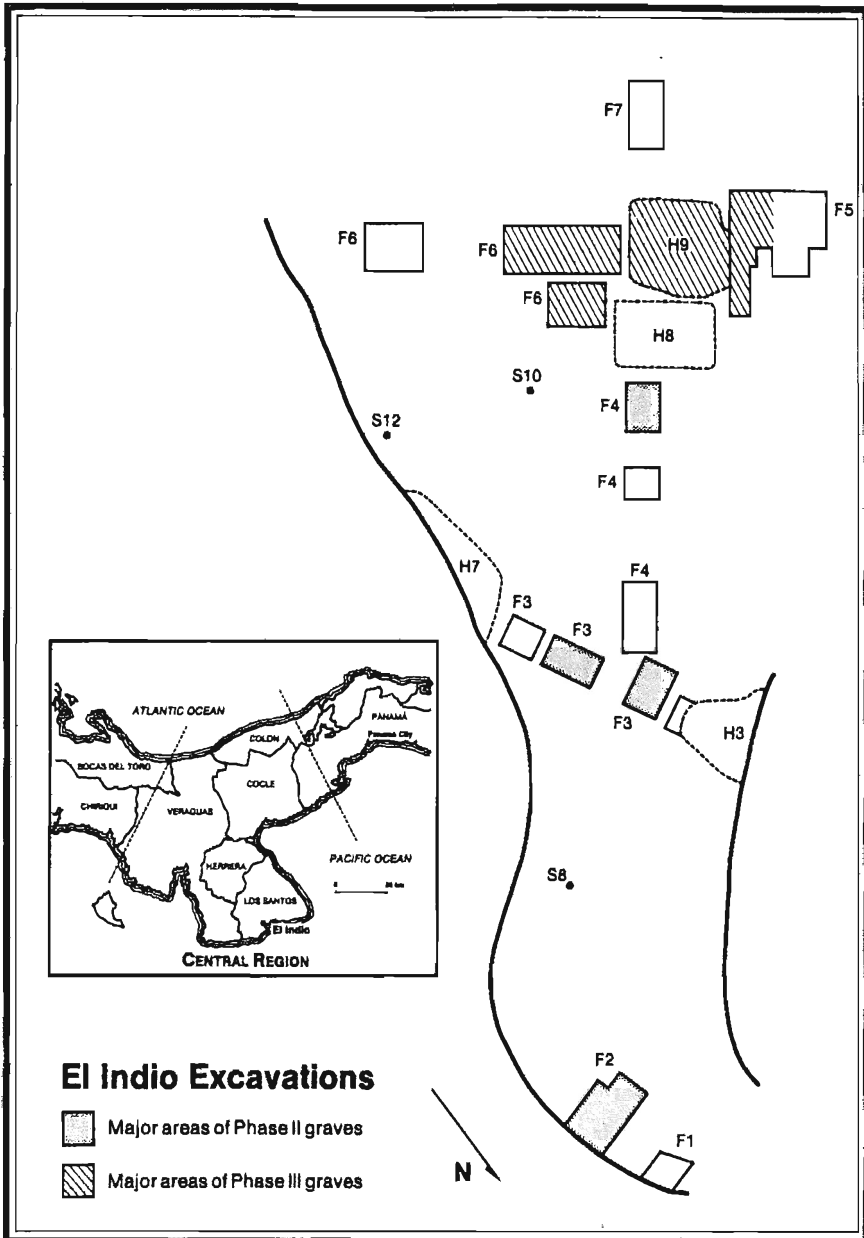


Fig. 5.2. El Indio excavations. (After Ichon 1974:79.)

objects suggests that they may indicate a specific status associated with the age grade of the child.

Six gold objects were uncovered among the Phase III interments at El Indio. Three (two disks and an eroded pendant) came from three distinct adult burials; three other pendants (two eroded and one in the shape of two frogs or toads) came from the most complex grave at the site, a burial of two children. The iconography of the one identifiable gold froglike pendant is, obviously, similar to that of the shell pendants also found in the children's graves.

This distribution of gold mortuary artifacts does not provide any clear suggestions that they were of unique importance in determining higher levels of status or rank. The gold objects do not occur in graves that are particularly unusual except in the one case where they are found in the richest grave of the cemetery. Yet I am reluctant to offer much additional interpretation on this matter because the lack of data on the sexing of the interments seriously hampers the investigation. However, it is clear that the mortuary furnishings among the Phase III El Indio graves are parceled out in general and, at least, on the criterion of age. The gold disks, for example, were placed with adults and most of the pendants were found with children. Such social distinctions are common among many societies and play a broadly definitive role in determining social relationships in groups less complex than ranked societies or chiefdoms. It is of interest to note that at this site children were apparently more richly acknowledged than adults; moreover, the consistency or pattern of status recognition through mortuary remains was lower for adults than children. Nonetheless, gold, although present, is not of paramount importance in recognizing any readily identifiable levels of high status, ranking, or hierarchy at El Indio.

This does not mean that social distinctions or grades are not evident among the Phase III burials at El Indio. They are, and they are articulated through a greater variation in the number of mortuary goods in a burial; the exclusiveness of specific grave objects, in this case shell, to children's graves; and the dramatically increased use of clothing or costume elements in the burials (for example, disks and pendants). The differences in the distribution and types of mortuary furnishings in these graves indicate that criteria other than age played an important role in the selection and inclusion of particular mortuary objects in a burial. In addition, the Phase III graves are distributed within the site of El Indio in specific groups characteristic of formal cemeteries. The increase in complexity — compared with earlier graves from the site — associated with the distribution and content of the

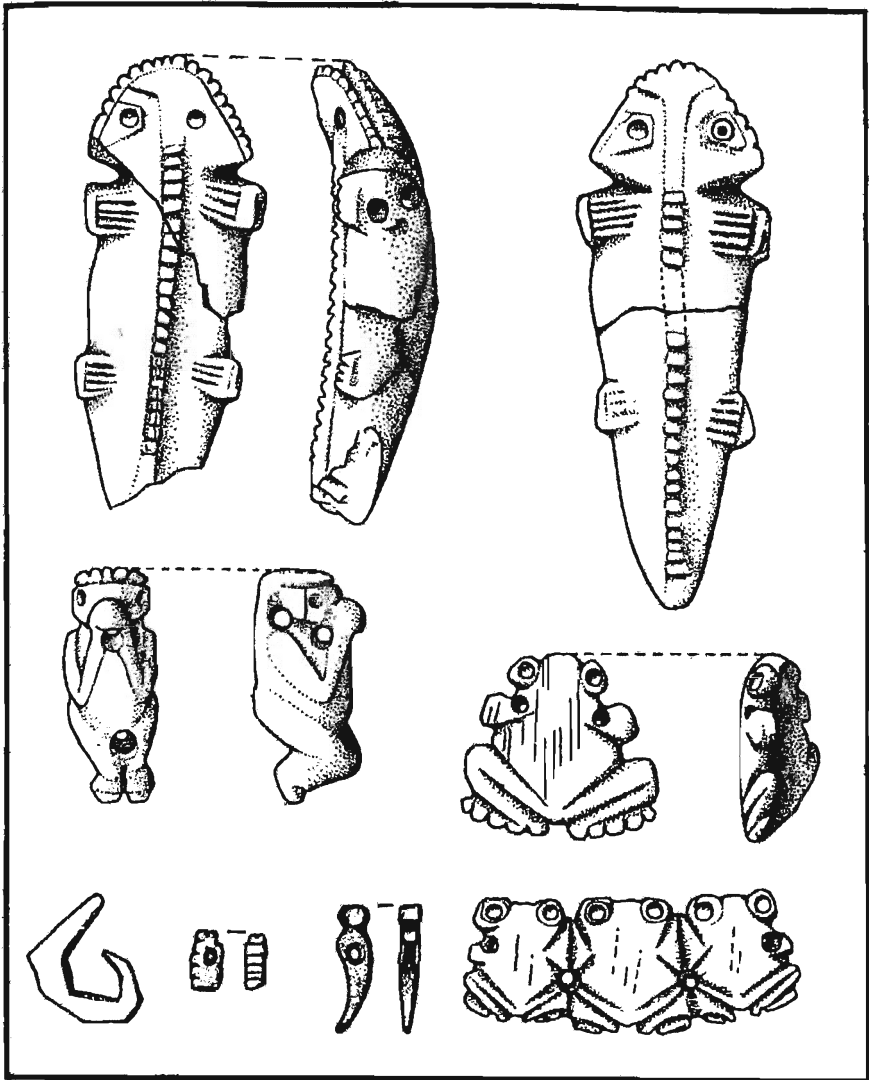


Fig. 5.3. Shell mortuary arts from Phase II El Indio graves (exact dimensions of objects are unknown). Top: Conch shells carved in the shape of saurians. Center: Spondylus shell in the shapes of a human or monkey (left) and a frog or toad (right). Bottom: Spondylus shells in the shapes of hooks, teeth, and frogs or toads. (After Ichon 1974: Figs. 86b, 86c, 87s, 88a, 89a, 89b.)

mortuary furnishings, and the presence of a formal cemetery area indicate increased social complexity, that is, a more hierarchical social system than was present during the earlier Phase II. Nonetheless, the burials still represent a society markedly less complex than the chiefdom cemeteries of other central Panamanian and contemporary sites such as the Sitio Conte.

The Sitio Conte (Figure 5.4), one of the most famous sites in Lower Central America, was excavated between 1930 and 1933 by Harvard University's Peabody Museum (Lothrop 1937, 1942) and again in 1940 by a team from the University of Pennsylvania (Briggs 1989; Mason 1940, 1941, 1942). The site, a necropolis that covers at least four hectares on the bank of the Río Grande de Coclé, was discovered as the river changed course and numerous burials were exposed by subsequent erosion. The full extent of the site is unknown, but recent investigations by Carlos Fitzgerald (1990) suggest that it may have served as a cemetery for the nearby village of El Caño and, perhaps, for Nata as well.

The excavations at the Sitio Conte uncovered approximately 100 graves holding at least 201 individuals. Seventy-two percent of the interments were adult males, 21 percent adult females, 2 percent adolescent males, and 4 percent adolescent females. Obviously, adult males dominated the recovered cemetery population by nearly three to one; the almost complete absence of children is noteworthy. It would be reasonable to conclude that Sitio Conte is a special-use burial facility for adults (93 percent of the interred) and, even more so, for male adults. Indeed, all but one adult female and all of the adolescents were found associated with an adult male.

The grave furnishings ranged from nothing in a single interment to many thousands of objects in a complex grave of more than twenty individuals. The large number of mortuary furnishings found at the Sitio Conte continues to impress scholars: one grave alone yielded over 7,500 objects, and several other graves had mortuary furnishings numbering in the thousands. The complex spatial arrangement of the graves and the array of furnishings are just as staggering. Eighty-six of the 100 graves contained mortuary furnishings. Identifying over ninety-one separate types of furnishings and using the same four cluster-analysis algorithms cited above (Statistical Analysis System 1979, 1982), I measured similarities among both the presence and absence of grave goods as well as the absolute numbers of furnishings in each grave.

Twenty-one percent, or eighteen, of the graves contained over 60 percent of the interred individuals. These upper-status graves averaged 4.6

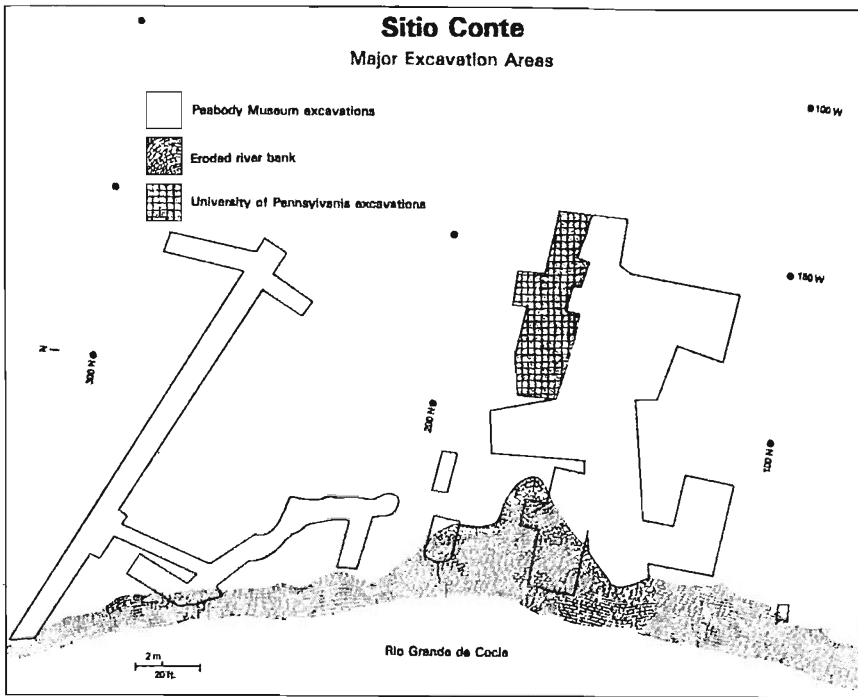


Fig. 5.4. Sitio Conte: major excavation areas. (From Briggs 1989:69.)

interments of which 77 percent were adult males. In most cases, the individuals who make up the multiple interments seem to be a combination of a central figure accompanied by retainers or relatives.

In addition, the absolute number of mortuary objects as well as the number of different types of objects (qualitative criteria determined by a combination of function and decoration, for example, polychrome plate, plain jar, gold ear rod, and so forth) found in these graves bolsters a disparity between them and the remaining sixty-eight lower-status graves. Upper-status graves averaged from a low of 19.8 to 44.6 types of objects per grave. In contrast, the majority of interments representing the lower-status interments averaged only 6.3 object types per grave. Moreover, the diversity in the types of the mortuary furnishings present in the lower-status graves was far below that of the elite graves. For example, 70 percent of all mortuary furnishings found in the lower-status interments were ceramics and gold objects and only accounted for 6 percent of the total number of furnishings

from these same graves. Yet, as we will see below, the preparation of mortuary furnishings, especially sumptuary goods, in the higher-status burials was considerably different.

The distribution, measured by either the absolute number of objects and interments in a single grave or the range in types of objects among the upper-level graves, displays an intriguing and, perhaps, expected pattern. As one increases either the quantity or variation in types of objects found in a grave, the number of graves that share the increased complement of furnishings decreases; that is, fewer and fewer graves have more and more different kinds of mortuary furnishings, a distribution that resembles a pyramid. In addition, the distribution of mortuary arts that might be considered sumptuary or costume objects also follows a pyramidal structure. Two other aspects of this structure are relevant: the number of individuals interred and the variation in designs on the mortuary furnishings mimic the pyramidal pattern, that is, the number of graves decreases as these criteria increase. The importance of the structural characteristics of these data is their redundancy; almost no matter what criterion one isolates, the correspondence to other criteria is strong. These characteristics of the mortuary population combined with the qualitative and quantitative distribution of furnishings allow, I think, some justification for inferring that these graves represent individuals of higher status and rank and can be arranged hierarchically according to their fit within the pyramid.

With this in mind, let's return to the issue of gold. Who has the gold goods at the Sitio Conte? As one may expect, as we rise toward the apex of the pyramid, that is, as we increase both the number of mortuary furnishings and their typological and visual diversity, the number of gold objects also increases. But is this rise in the gold furnishings of a greater or singular magnitude compared to other objects? Yes and no. What is interesting is that the number of bone and ivory objects also increases in overall frequency at a similar rate as the gold items. Gold does not seem to stand apart from bone or ivory as a class of mortuary furnishing. The percentage of lithic objects in the burials, on the other hand, remains fairly constant among all graves, but the number of ceramics as a percentage of mortuary furnishings drops significantly from lower- to higher-status graves.

The specific distributions of types of furnishings manufactured from the four general classes of materials echo this pattern. In the full complement of the Sitio Conte graves, 20 percent of the artifact types are lithic, 12 percent gold, 12 percent bone or ivory, and 56 percent ceramic. Yet among the sixty-eight graves representing lower-status interments, lithics make

Table 5.1
Sitio Conte: Percentages of Mortuary Furnishing Types Calculated
by Material of Manufacture

| High-Status Grave Clusters | Lithic (%) | Gold/Metal (%) | Bone/Ivory (%) | Ceramic (%) |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| I (3 graves) | 20 (n=28) | 23 (n=31) | 23 (n=32) | 34 (n=46) |
| II (1 grave) | 15 (n=6) | 36 (n=14) | 21 (n=8) | 28 (n=11) |
| III (2 graves) | 21 (n=15) | 23 (n=16) | 16 (n=11) | 40 (n=28) |
| IV (2 graves) | 23 (n=13) | 12 (n=7) | 18 (n=10) | 47 (n=27) |
| V (2 graves) | 26 (n=15) | 12 (n=7) | 19 (n=11) | 43 (n=25) |
| VI (1 grave) | 16 (n=4) | 24 (n=6) | 16 (n=4) | 44 (n=11) |
| VII (7 graves) | 27 (n=36) | 8 (n=11) | 11 (n=14) | 54 (n=72) |
| Low-Status Grave Clusters | | | | |
| VIII (62 graves) | 18 (n=72) | 5 (n=18) | 5 (n=18) | 73 (n=289) |
| IX (5 graves) | 13 (n=9) | 14 (n=10) | 9 (n=6) | 64 (n=44) |
| X (1 grave) | 27 (n=4) | 7 (n=1) | 33 (n=5) | 33 (n=5) |
| Summary of Graves | | | | |
| High-Status Graves | 23 | 18 | 17 | 42 |
| Low-Status Graves | 18 | 6 | 6 | 70 |
| All Graves | 20 | 12 | 12 | 56 |

up 18 percent of the furnishing types, gold 6 percent, bone or ivory 6 percent, and ceramics 70 percent. Among the eighteen graves that account for the higher-status graves, 23 percent of the mortuary artifact types are lithic, 18 percent gold, 17 percent bone and ivory, and 42 percent ceramic (Table 5.1). The pattern that emerges suggests, as noted above, that among the higher-status graves, the relative frequency of ceramic types decreases and the frequency of gold, ivory, and bone object types increases.

I calculated independently the distributions of mortuary furnishing types for individual elite graves; the pattern remained the same. That is, among those graves determined to be of higher status because of the number of variation of object types and the variation in visual designs, the number

of ceramics as a percentage of all categories decreases. As well, the proportion of bone, ivory, and gold types increases. The proportion of lithics, interestingly, remains fairly constant (cf. Bernstein 1984). As importantly, the specific types of gold, shell, or bone objects that account for the increase in frequency are largely limited to sumptuary or costume items, including, for example, beads, carved or cast figurines, plaques, ear plugs, nose ornaments, and pendants.

There is, however, a discernible bias in the above numbers. During the excavations of the complex higher-status graves, literally thousands of ceramic vessels and their fragments were encountered. They were used aboriginally as fill on the top and sides of the grave, and as bedding for the interments. Other scholars have suggested that during the funerary rituals, people stood around the graves throwing in recently manufactured ceramic vessels one on top of another (Linares 1977). Many of these pots were broken, and most were difficult to put back together or even quantify. Moreover, numerous vessels and sherds were left unrecorded and in situ by the excavators or simply stuffed into large burlap bags and noted as "a sack of sherds." As a result, I think that ceramics are underrepresented in the calculations relating to the larger graves.

Let's now return once again to my point. Are gold objects independent and unambiguous measurements of high status or rank? I don't think so. If they do indicate higher social positions at Sitio Conte, they do so no more than do bone and ivory. At this site, at least, the key to understanding the relative social position of an interment is the redundancy of a variety of quantitative and qualitative indicators and not the presence or absence of one particular variable such as gold (cf. Bernstein 1984). Plainly put, we cannot define the higher-status graves in Sitio Conte simply on the presence of gold artifacts. At the contemporary village of El Indio, the case is more clear. If one had to pick a single type of object as an indication of relative status, shell pendants seem to be more relevant and are used to indicate a particular status, namely age. Unlike the relative simplicity of El Indio, at the Sitio Conte we are probably measuring a more complex combination of both horizontal and vertical status or rank recognition.

Among ongoing mortuary research in Central America, important problems continue to be addressed. Some of this work has the promise of making a general as well as regional impact. In concluding this chapter, I would like to bring attention to just a few of these trends.

Several studies have argued that the mortuary furnishings found in a specific grave correspond to the primary occupational role of the interred

individual. Among the better-known examples are Wolfgang Haberland's identification of shamans in burials from Ometepe Island in Lake Nicaragua and Buenos Aires in southeastern Costa Rica (1961) and Richard Cooke's suggestion that a large group of axes and other lithic materials interred with individuals at the Sitio Sierra in central Panama represent the trade of an axe maker or repairer (1975, 1978).

If one interprets occupational activity as a particular type of status, the general applicability of this proposition bears discussion. That is, the relative distribution of mortuary furnishings among a social group can provide potential information on differences in status and other social dimensions if age and sex can be controlled by the recovery and analysis of human skeletal remains. The extension of the analysis is, however, that under some conditions, the type of mortuary furnishings can provide direct information on the daily activities of an individual during his or her life. Without doubt this is a provocative assertion. However, it does need to be operationalized, which, I think, can lead to some very interesting research.

Most importantly, we need to know under what conditions the mortuary furnishings do inform us of occupational status and when they do not, as well as identifying what artifacts represent what human activities. The problem is not unlike activity areas. The assumption is normally made that the artifacts or other debris found in a particular location represent an activity that took place there. We know all too well from ethnoarchaeological studies that this assumption is not generally reliable. I cannot offer any immediate steps toward resolution of activity or occupational specificity for mortuary remains. However, it bears repeating that as the level of social complexity increases, the complexity of mortuary practices also increases. Therefore, our ability to identify unambiguously the representation of a precise status, for example, not just higher or lower but that of a prominent axe maker, may be less problematic among less complex groups simply because of the lack of social noise among the mortuary remains, that is, the amount of variation due to increasing status complexities. In addition, among less complex groups, the so-called egalitarian societies, variation in status is, per capita, less redundant or more entropic than among more complex organized societies. This may have the consequence that task-related performance is more clearly identified as the unique contribution of an individual and, therefore, acknowledged as such at death and in the mortuary program.

My last point is more akin to a simple observation. Among much of the Lower Central American archaeological literature discussing mortuary

remains, the location of graves and groupings of graves or other mortuary facilities is fairly rigorously observed and noted. For example, surveys and excavations in the Diquís region of southern Costa Rica identify several types of cemeteries distinguished by their location relative to habitation sites (Drolet 1983, 1984, 1986, 1988; cf. Snarskis 1984a, 1984b). Some of the differences in the location of these cemeteries seem to relate to temporal or historical dimensions, although others appear to represent differential treatment of the dead by contemporaries of the same village. Moreover, the reports in *Vinculos* (10:1-2, 1984) of Payson Sheets's and his team's work in the Cordillera of Tilarán in Costa Rica, as well as numerous other archaeological projects in Costa Rica and Panama (for example, Bernstein 1986; Ryder 1986; Vázquez Leiva 1986a), often provide detailed information concerning the spatial patterns and locations of cemeteries and other groupings of interments vis-à-vis living sites.

The interpretative potential of this information has been left mostly untapped. Arthur Saxe and Patricia Gall, in their ethnographic research in Malaysia, developed a provocative hypothesis concerning the relationship between the presence or absence of formal burial facilities and socioeconomic dynamics (1977). There is, they established, a strong correlation among the development of lineage systems, restrictions on resource availability, and creation of formal interment facilities such as cemeteries. Originally formulated by Saxe, the hypothesis states: "To the degree that corporate group rights to use and/or control crucial but restricted resources are attained and/or legitimized by means of lineal descent from the dead (i.e., lineal ties to ancestors), such groups will maintain formal disposal areas for the exclusive disposal of their dead, and conversely" (1970:119-121).

In a simplistic restatement, increases of restrictions or availability of resources, especially from competing groups (due, for example, to increasing population) result in more formal declarations of control or rights to particular territories. These rights are justified or rationalized by the claim that our ancestors lived here; therefore, we have the rights to this land and its resources. One expressive mechanism of affirming these rights is a lineage system that formalizes members' relationship to their ancestors; this is physically displayed by discrete mortuary facilities inhabited by these same ancestors, hence, the development of cemeteries. As important is the converse of the hypothesis. They note: "As the importance of lineality or corporateness decreases, we would expect the disposal areas to become less specialized to this one purpose, the area itself to become less tangible as the

specialized function which it served to bound (to separate from others) disappears" (1977:75).

The differences, therefore, between a formal cemetery isolated on a ridge above a village as noted in southern Costa Rica and the burials inside of a dwelling excavated in the Central Highlands or Atlantic Watershed may provide the foundation for important and relevant social inferences pertaining to lineage systems, territoriality, group solidarity, and resource circumscription. The spatial circumstances or planning of mortuary areas in Lower Central America are, therefore, a potentially productive arena for future research directed toward mortuary practices, site planning or use, and social dynamics.

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