Identity-based Violence

As humans, we instinctively sort ourselves into groups of “us” and “them.” Such behavior reliably produces preferences toward in-group members and biases against out-group members2-6. Although this social boundary formation often takes place non-violently during intergroup interactions, during periods of scarcity or stress humans often carry out preemptive violence to defend their in-group if they perceive out-groups as potential threats.

Socio-political upheaval, then, is often accompanied by increasing violence directed at individuals or groups perceived as categorically different or “other”2-4.

Research Question

This research examines identity-based violence in the past by answering the question:

How did aspects of individuals’ social identities—specifically their geographic origin—contribute to the selection of victims of ritual violence?

The Non-Grid 4 Shrine Site

The central Mexican shrine site of Non-Grid 4 is located in the Basin of Mexico2. It dates to the Epiclassic period (600-900 CE), a time of dramatic political upheaval and social reorganization in central Mexico.

The skulls of at least 173 individuals were interred at the Non-Grid 4 shrine. Many individuals exhibited evidence of throat slitting, ritual exsanguination, and subsequent decapitation.

Methods – a biogeochemical approach

I analyzed radiogenic strontium isotopes (Sr/Sr) and stable oxygen isotopes (O) in first molar, third molar, and bone fragments from a sample of Non-Grid 4 sacrificed individuals.

Because these tissues all mineralize and remodel at different times, their isotopic composition can be used to trace individuals’ mobility over the life course.

Samples were prepared in the Archaeological Chemistry Laboratory1. Sr/Sr and O isotope samples were analyzed on a multi-collector inductively-coupled plasma mass spectrometer. Sr/Sr samples were analyzed on an ICP mass spectrometer.

Interpreting Sr/Sr Results

58% of the victims were immigrants to the region, having been born elsewhere but moved to the region later in life. 27% were foreigners who were born and lived elsewhere for most of their lives. 14% were locals who were born and lived in the region their entire lives.

Results

Reconstructing Residential Mobility among Sacrificial Victims

Sr/Sr and O values in sacrificial victims’ bone and enamel tissues were compared with expected local isotopic baselines indicated by the dotted lines. Elements falling within the baseline values indicate that individuals lived locally at the Non-Grid 4 shrine site during the time of tissue formation.

Combining Multiple Isotopic Systems: Sr/Sr and O

Most first and third molar samples fall outside of the expected baseline range. The majority of bone samples fall inside the combined isotopic baseline.

Discussion

Sr/Sr and O isotopic values indicate that most sacrificial victims were not “local” to the Non-Grid 4 region. A majority of sacrificial victims were immigrants or foreigners.

Few sacrificial victims were “locals.” Individuals of non-local origin appear to have been predisposed to suffer violence at Non-Grid 4.

In prehispanic Mesoamerica, geographic origins were important signifiers of social difference2. During a time of socio-political upheaval such as the Epiclassic period, immigrants and foreigners would have been perceived as “other” and may have been targeted for violence specifically because of their divergent residential histories.

Future Research

Future work will examine other aspects of social identity including: Ethnicity

Biological kinship

may have predisposed individuals to suffer violence.

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Literature Cited