

Raiding for women in the pre-Hispanic Southwest?

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A portion of the large 12th and 13th-century A.D. site of Aztec, near the contemporary town of Aztec, New Mexico. Credit: Tim Kohler

An important new archaeological study from the December issue of *Current Anthropology* is the first to document interregional movement of women in the pre-Hispanic Southwest. Using an analysis of grave sites, the researchers found more female remains during periods of political influence, providing an interesting insight into the ways warfare may contribute the local archaeological record.

"Warfare is common in small- and intermediate-scale societies all over the world, now and in prehistory. Capturing women was often either a goal, or a by-product, of such conflict," says archaeologist Tim Kohler

(Washington State University), who authored the study with Kathryn Kramer Turner (U.S. Forest Service).

Analyzing data on 1,353 human remains from grave sites, Kohler and Kramer Turner found unexpectedly high ratios of female-to-male remains in the majestic 11th-century ruins in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, and a related 13th-century site to the north called Aztec, which are among the most famous pre-Hispanic sites in North America.

The researchers note that many sites from the same time period in the Mesa Verde region in Southwest Colorado – just north of the Aztec site – contain fewer women than they should. This imbalance may be the result of non-coercive movement, such as women migrating toward elites or the recruitment of women as specialized producers of prized items, such as jewelry or pottery. However, the apparent excesses of women coincide with a period of high young adult mortality, which indicates violence.

"Given the mirror symmetry of their sex ratios in the 1200s and the elevated death rates among young people in both areas, we suggest that societies in the Totah (which encompasses the Aztec site) obtained these women from Northern San Juan societies to the northwest through raiding and abduction," write the authors.

Excavations near the site of Aztec also revealed that some women in the Aztec's region were not buried in the usual respectful manner. Many of the women's remains also bear marks of abuse.

Source: University of Chicago

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