



Social Memory, Identity, and Death: Anthropological Perspectives on Mortuary Rituals

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Burying the Dead at Tlatilco: Social Memory and Social Identities

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Every burial that archaeologists excavate resulted from a complex sequence of practices that were initiated, not with the death of the person or persons who were interred, but long before, as their social identities were shaped and their individual experiences linked them to others through webs of kin and non-kin relationships. Burials are thus complex intersections of processes of formation of social identities. Burials and the mortuary rituals that accompanied their creation were also intersections of the formation of social memory, media through which social identities gained greater or lesser degrees of shared currency and temporal persistence. Taking these perspectives on ancient burials and mortuary rituals as an entry point into their understanding leads to very different approaches toward archaeological data. Using the rich documents provided by burials excavated at the central Mexican Formative period site of Tlatilco, in this chapter I explore how examining the place of burials in the creation of social identity and social memory shifts archaeological practice. I trace a trajectory from describing statistical trends in interments of female individuals to discussing the particular lives of women who lived, died, and were buried at this ancient village. I argue that neither perspective alone is sufficient. Each approach complements the other, but without the particularistic examination, burials as social occasions—with all their experiential aspects—will simply be lost under the weight of their decontextualization.

Archaeology has a long history of privileging mortuary analyses. The systematic exploration of burials as reflections of the social status and role of the deceased (Binford 1971; Saxe 1970; cf. Brown 1995) has been challenged by approaches treating burials as masking, rather than reflecting, social status (e.g., Pearson 1982). Running consistently through all of these approaches is

a more-or-less intuitive sense that burials should be heavily weighted with meaning because they were formed under the pressure of one of the most significant transformations in the human life course. At the same time, mortuary analyses are one of the classic sites for the expression of archaeological anxiety about the impossibility of ever knowing anything about the past with any certainty. Often these doubts are expressed within the bounds of the same texts. Burials with the most complex treatment and largest number of accompanying artifacts may be described with statistical certainty as those of societal elites, while when the burials in question are those of infants or young children, the same inference may be questioned (Brown 1981, 1995:8; Larsen 1995:249–50).

As Susan Kus (1992) has perhaps most eloquently argued, something fundamental to the living process of interring and memorializing the dead is missing when archaeologists come to interpret the final remains found within archaeological sites; the emotions, sights, smells, sounds, and experiential aspects of mortuary rites are rarely systematically considered as part of the forces structuring the final disposition of the dead. That absence in archaeological analyses is particularly unfortunate because it deprives us of a concern with burials as social practices by the living through which enduring social memory is created, through which everyday and individualistic occurrences are transformed into powerful common experiences that bind survivors together in new social forms (cf. George 1996:186–200; Kan 1989:181–96). “Representational” (following Barrett 1994) accounts of burials treat them as simple residues of events that had preceded their creation, mere traces of a past in the past. John Barrett (1994:87–90) rightly notes that representational approaches fail to acknowledge the creation of the past in the present through the active

intervention of archaeologists/authors. He suggests that, as archaeologists accept their role in interpretation, they come to occupy a place in a process of meaning-making not unlike that of the past actors whose actions produced the material residues we recover, who were also engaged not simply in reflecting what was, but in creating and recreating social relations through the use of material media. This perspective transforms the role of the archaeologist and, I would suggest, provides an impetus for us to seek to produce more and different kinds of knowledge from the material traces we document.

I suggest that ancient burials can be viewed as particularly charged sites where living survivors inscribed the dead into social memory in particular ways, as part of an ongoing process of spinning webs of social relations between themselves and others (Barrett 1994:94; Kuijt this volume; Meskell this volume; cf. Bloch and Parry 1982; Kan 1989:125–77; Raharijaona and Kus this volume; Schiller this volume; Weiner 1976:85–90; Woodburn 1982). As Nancy Munn (1986:164) writes, “Death itself initiates only a *physical* dissolution of the body...death dissolves neither the intersubjective amalgam that constitutes the *bodily person* and forms the ground of each self, nor the intersubjective connections between others built on and condensed within the deceased’s person” (original emphasis). The existing biographies of the deceased were raw material available for the creation of social memory and social meaning, and the way that mortuary rituals were conducted and burial settings constructed extended those already established social histories.

We can view burials, then, as episodes in unfolding stories. Traditional archaeological practice treats the particularity of burials as noise to be filtered out in pursuit of regularities. As literally hundreds of studies have shown, regularities are there, and can be discovered through statistical examination or simply by observing patterns of presence and absence of specific features. We may argue that the regularities of mortuary rituals were one of the ways ancient societies were structured (in Giddens’s [1979:62–66, 69–73, 1984:1–14] sense) through practice.

But the grain of structure is broad and ultimately fails to encompass the full power that mortuary rites would have had as embodied performances within which social actors reworked their emotional, social, and personal ties to those around them with whom they were connected through the deceased. Archaeological burial populations provide an unparalleled opportunity to explore not only the broad regularities of structuration but

also the finer variation of individual practices, in ways that enhance and, I argue, improve the realism of our present accounts of the past.

Life and Death at Tlatilco

In order to illustrate my argument, I undertake here an exercise in reanalysis of my own work on more than two hundred published burials from the Highland Central Mexican site of Tlatilco (Joyce 1999). Tlatilco was exposed to modern archaeology accidentally through the excavations of brickworkers in the area of modern Mexico City. Archaeologists from Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) undertook documentation of the chance-exposed burials and more extensive deliberate excavation of other parts of the site (Piña Chan 1958; Porter 1953; Garcia Moll et al. 1991). Perhaps because the original discoveries at Tlatilco were informal, the site was originally presented as a cemetery, and even the more scientific excavations were geared primarily to documenting burials. However, as the INAH excavators and later analysts of the original burials have noted, features at the site that were visible in the walls of excavated units indicate that the burials were placed within the confines of a poorly preserved village of perishable houses, with house yards containing bell-shaped storage pits, sometimes used secondarily for burials.

A preliminary cluster analysis found that adult female burials from Tlatilco contained the most pottery and that nonpottery items were found more often in adult male or juvenile burials (Serra and Sugiura 1987). A statistical cluster of burials composed of individuals of mixed age and sex shared the use of iron-ore mirrors, jade belts, jade ear ornaments, and “rock-crystal” beads, along with certain elaborate ceramic vessels. In a more extended statistical analysis, Paul Tolstoy (1989) defined consistent rankings reflected in the quality and quantity of objects included in a burial, the depth and preparation of the grave, and the position of the body. He identified iron-ore mirrors, necklaces, and greenstone and shell objects as indicators of the top rank of a social hierarchy. He concluded that not all of the variability in the burial population could be explained simply as due to the reflection of individual rank: “The nature of these objects and their diverse patterns of occurrence suggest that the denotation of rank was not their exclusive function...Though consistent in the ranking they suggest for individual graves, these indicators do not exhibit uniformly strong associations with one another. This suggests that other important and, in part, hidden factors contribute to their distributions” (Tolstoy 1989:109–12).

The elucidation of possible “hidden factors” contributing to the differences among burials at Tlatilco has been the object of my subsequent work on these data (Joyce 1996, 1998a, 1999, 2001:chapter 2, In press a, In press b).

This work has been based on the desire to produce an account of this past society more in line with ethnographically observed social realities, where some individuals have higher status than others, where status and prerogatives change throughout life, and where the possibilities for social action are always unpredictably complex. To do this, I argue, we must consider not only regularities but also variation: the general practices whose conformity suggests intent by the living to bury in the manner of Tlatilco, as well as the distinctive actions that testify that each burial was itself an act of structuration through which social memory was formed and reformed.

The Mourning Community: Spatial Clusters and Social Groups

I have previously demonstrated that much of the variation between Tlatilco burials can be accounted for statistically as a consequence of their location in spatial clusters (Joyce 1999). Spatial clustering is evident on the map of burials at the site (Figure 2.1). Within spatial clusters, burials tend to share the same orientation or have perpendicular orientations, a characteristic that may result from something as simple as aligning burials placed below house floors or in house yards with house or yard walls. The size of these clusters is consistent with the dimensions of the only contemporary houses known from the period (e.g., at nearby Coapexco: Tolstoy 1989:90–91). A speculative overlay of such possible house boundaries can be mapped on the clusters of burials from Tlatilco (Figure 2.2), assuming that the orientation of burials followed house walls and that documented bell-shaped pits were outside the dwellings, as they were elsewhere in contemporary Mexico (e.g., San Jose Mogote: Flannery and Winter 1976; Winter 1976). Two groups of orientations evident in these trial house compounds (compare Figures 2.2 and 2.3) roughly correspond to clusters with burials containing the earliest and latest pottery vessels (Tolstoy 1989), perhaps representing as much as two centuries of remodeling of houses in the same general locations.

I propose that these spatial clusters of burials are more than arbitrary units. They represent the residue from specific sequences of activities within the bounds of a dwelling space, presumably by persons with social rights to be and act in that location. Tolstoy (1989) suggested that two moieties were represented at the site by distinct

burial orientations. He argued that rich burials within different burial clusters, sharing a common orientation, could perhaps be understood as persons who were locally born, and hence more privileged in death. I liken the people engaged within these spatial settings in the practice of mortuary ritual to members of social Houses (after Lévi-Strauss 1982:172–87, 1987:151–96; see Joyce 1999, 2000, 2001; Joyce and Gillespie 2000). As persons who recognized each other as having common histories embodied in the House compound, and who exercised rights through the House, the people of the Houses of Tlatilco held among their obligations the proper treatment of the dead, through whom the living were connected to their own ancestors and the members of other Houses.

The repeated placement of burials in the same spatial clusters ensured that later burials would sometimes disturb earlier ones. Treatment of the dead was accordingly an ongoing process, involving the reincorporation of human skeletal remains in mortuary and other ritual practices, not ending with initial interment. The concentration of multiple skulls in pits is an instance of such secondary treatment. Certain social practices would have ensured that such reincorporation took place predictably: placement in a marked location, such as a previously defined bell-shaped pit or more shallow burial, for example. Secondary treatment of skeletal remains is associated with spatial clusters of burials that most likely indicate former locations of individual House compounds occupied for multiple generations. Reworking of the same localities for new burials may have helped reinforce the continuity evident in other aspects of burial practice, with the rediscovered treatment of previous interments inspiring similar treatment of the newly dead.

General mortuary practices that were reiterated within some clusters represent the repeated actions of residents of these clusters. They included treatment of the grave with red pigment, interment of the deceased wearing imperishable costume ornaments, and incorporation within the grave of the raw materials and by-products of obsidian working. Each of these burial characteristics resulted from localized mortuary practices that distinguished some clusters from others, emphasizing identity through time among the dead and, through the dead, among the living.

My account of the regularities in the Tlatilco burials, then, is based fundamentally on the idea that active social agents living in conditions of intimacy were responsible for the repeated primary burial, and secondary treatment, of deceased members of their own social group. Their freedom of action in these mortuary rites

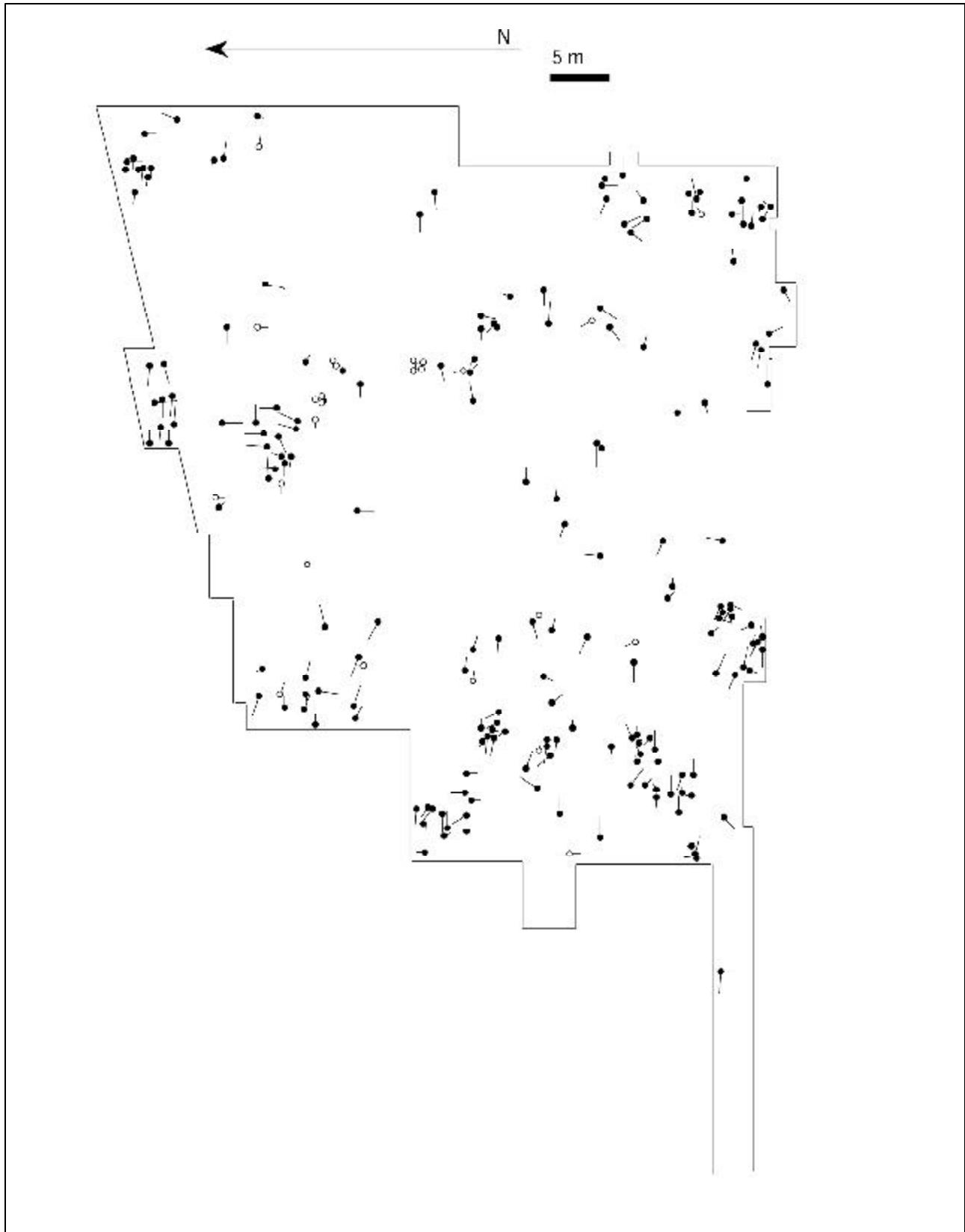


Figure 2.1. Burials from Tlatilco Temporada IV. Orientation of head indicated by circle.

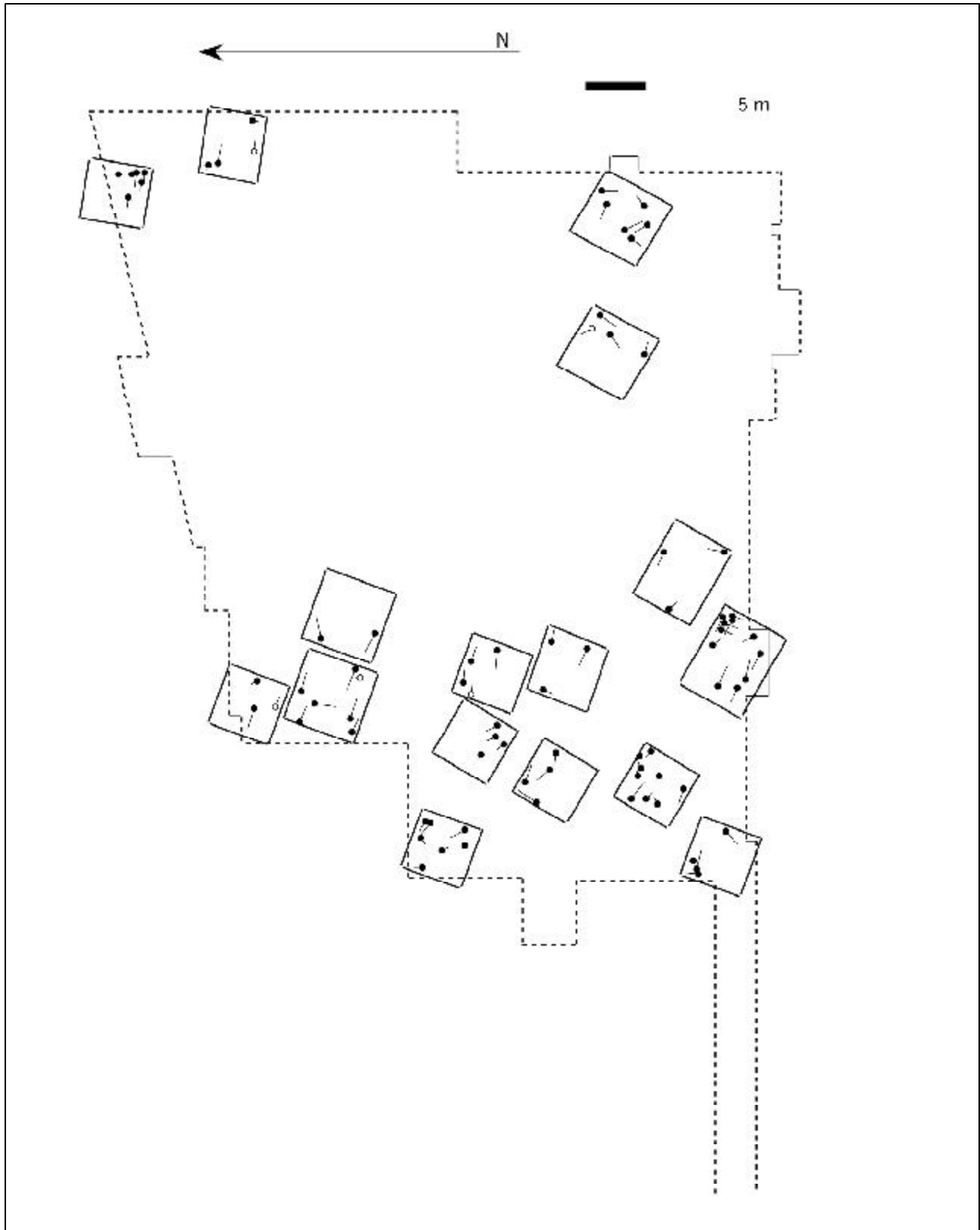


Figure 2.2. Tlatilco Temporada IV burials overlaid with rectangles representing typical local house foundation size, based on excavations at Coapexco. Only burials oriented east of north (west of south) included. Possible early phase of village?

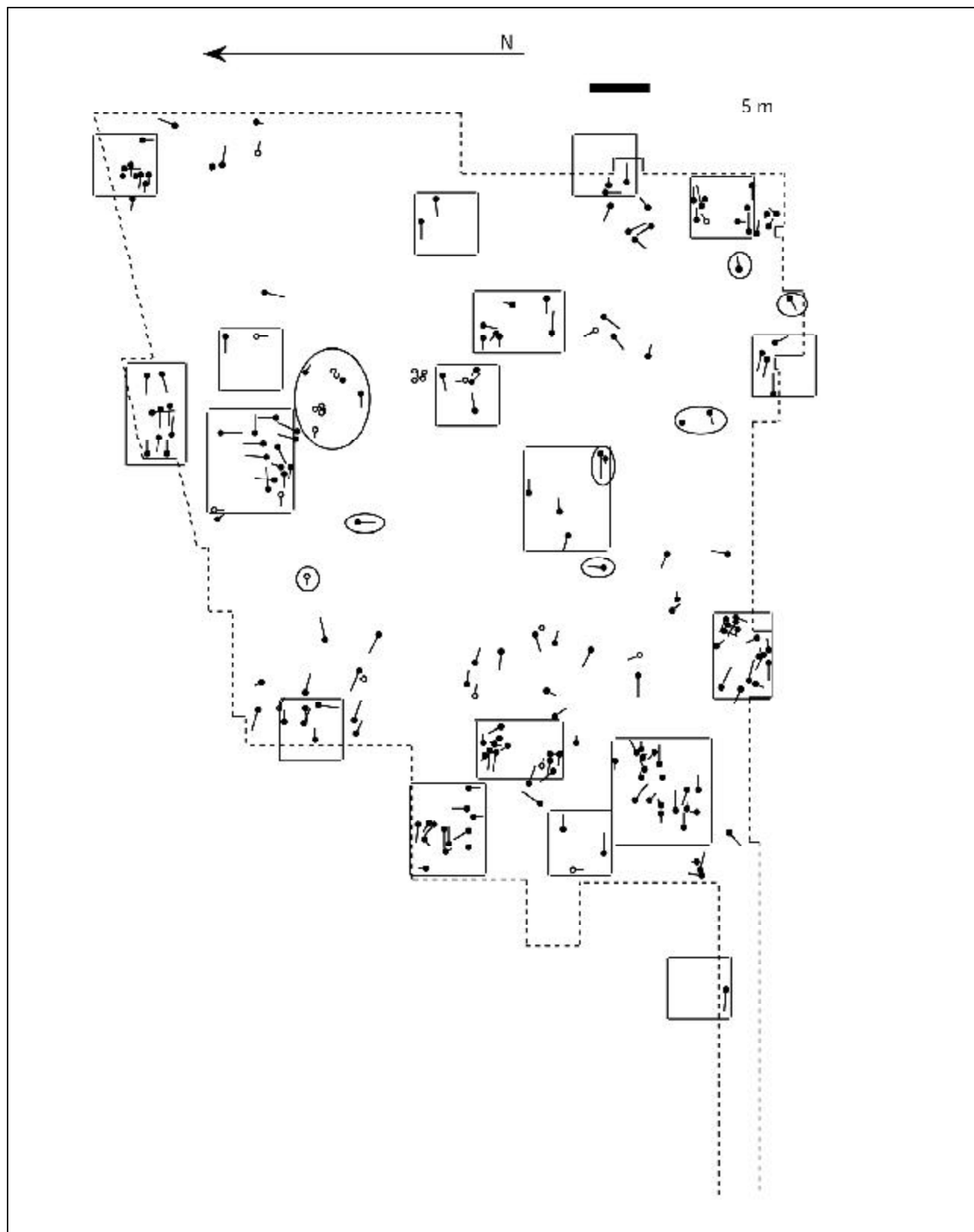


Figure 2.3. Tlatilco Temporada IV burials overlaid with rectangles representing typical local house foundation size, based on excavations at Coapexco. Only burials oriented north-south, east-west, used to align rectangles. Ovals mark extramural burials. All other burials from possible earlier phase of village.

was constrained by their expectation of the evaluation of others in their own social group, and by their own reflexive self-monitoring of their behavior in light of the models of acceptable and even laudable action provided by others in their intimate life (cf. Giddens 1979:202–10, 216–21). The product of their structured actions was both a perceptible material record of similarity over time and, equally important, a nonmaterial sense among members of the group of the perpetuation of connections among them. I view the fact that differences between groups are also evident primarily as an unintended consequence of structuration, a consequence that provided powerful material for discriminations within the wider community through their relation to the dead (cf. Giddens 1984:11–14). These relations of similarity within groups and differences between groups were adequately revealed through statistical approaches (Joyce 1999, 2001:chapter 2, In press a). Left behind in the wake of this level of analysis, however, is a residue of difference within groups that is better illustrated by a different approach, without which my account of life and death at Tlatilco would be appreciably diminished.

The Women of Tlatilco

I focus in this chapter only on the burials of women, not just because these have formed a major focus of my work on this population, but also because the very project I am undertaking greatly expands the space necessary to account for any one or a few of the burials within the Tlatilco population. Space does not allow this more nuanced exploration here of the death of both men and women at this site. Because previous analyses have repeatedly suggested that women may have made up the stable core of the social groups at Tlatilco, it is in their burials that I hope to see the greatest evidence of the appreciation of difference within the intimate quarters of the House, and the repetition of practices through which memory is mobilized and social structure reproduced.

Identifiably female burials made up about forty percent (86) of the 212 recorded burials excavated by INAH archaeologists during the fourth Tlatilco excavation campaign (Garcia Moll et al. 1991).¹ The occupants of these graves ranged in age from fifteen to over fifty years old. Many had indications of serious health problems: fifty-one percent suffered tooth decay, nineteen percent arthritic degeneration of the spine, and sixteen percent other disease-related changes to the skeleton. Tooth decay was noted as early as the age interval from fifteen to

nineteen years, spinal arthritis between twenty-six and thirty years. The bones of neonates were included in ten percent of the burials of females aged twenty through forty-four, perhaps as a result of infant and maternal mortality stemming from childbirth-related disease. One style of cranial modification, the tabular erect type, a practice detectable in unsexed skeletons as young as age nine months, was noted in sixty-six, or seventy-seven percent, of adult female burials.

The overall picture that emerges of women's lives at Tlatilco is easily summarized in this fashion. But this summary is as misleading as it is helpful. The composite female experience reflected here merges ages, as well as differences in elaboration between, and internal differentiation within, groups of burials likely to have been constructed by members of single social groups. An alternative way of seeing the women in these burials looks at what we can say about the life of each one individually by viewing their treatment in death as one point in the creation of their own social identities and their memorialization by their survivors.

This approach extends beyond the powerful products of statistical inference toward the limits of individual interpretation. In the following alternative account, I move from a more traditional, scientific, and generalizing language to a more particularistic, experiential, and emotional language. The burials chosen for description are representative of the key differences that can be documented in the burial population (Joyce 1999, 2001:chapter 2, In press a). The order of presentation moves from the examples for which we have least archaeological evidence to support an enriched description that takes into account social experience, to those that support the greatest amount of social interpretation. While I hope readers will take the opportunity to follow the shift in their own attitude toward the women of ancient Tlatilco by reading this narrative before seeking explanations for the selection of features highlighted, I also provide a running commentary in the endnotes that illuminates both my selection of these burials and my reasons for framing them as I do. The burials chosen for description cumulatively document the major trends revealed by the statistical analysis, but they do so by representing these trends as embodied in individual lives (cf. Meskell 1994). The result is likely to be uncomfortable for many archaeologists used to the ways that we have learned to banish emotion, experience, and the particular from our accounts. But, as I argue in my conclusion, there is something to be gained from this exercise that is crucial to the archaeological enterprise, something that is not ad-

vanced by our traditional normative and detached accounts of life and death.

Burying the Dead at Tlatilco

Burial 14A was one of five female burials forming a single cluster. Aged between seventeen and nineteen years, this individual exhibited the rarer tabular oblique cranial deformation, found in only seven burials at the site. The individual lacked any grave goods.²

The teenaged girl in burial 164 also was buried without any imperishable objects. Unlike the young woman in Burial 14A, her skull had been formed into the tabular erect shape more common among men and women at Tlatilco.³

The person in Burial 29, like Burial 164 the only female in her cluster, died at the same young age. Beginning in infancy by shaping her head, her family had labored to ensure that she approximated their ideal of beauty, and at her young death, she had an elegantly swept-back forehead. Reflecting the wealth of her House and her access through it to the choicest foods, her teeth already showed signs of decay. Surviving members of her family placed with her a single bowl and figurine, the most general offerings left with burials at Tlatilco, as well as a grinding stone and chipped stone scraper.⁴

The loss of the nineteen-year-old girl in burial 27 was felt deeply by her House. In life she had been intended to solidify ties between her House and another from the opposite moiety of Tlatilco. Her mortuary ceremonies were elaborated by her House to establish her firmly in the memory of both groups. She was dressed in her fanciest costume, with pendants of jade, shell, and iron ore from the borders of Guatemala, the Gulf Coast, and the Oaxaca Valley, the distant ends of the world known to her House. Multiple bowls, bottles, and figurines were left in her grave as a sign of respect and of confidence that her death would not represent a permanent setback for her House.⁵

If all went well, the young woman of burial 27 might one day be remembered as an important ancestor, like one of the two teenaged girls whose skulls were gathered with those of two other, older women in a pit in the courtyard of a neighboring house. The older of these two girls was accompanied in this relocation by the mandible of her six-month-old child, whose birth had ended her life and in turn, through her death, his own.⁶

Childbirth constituted a major risk for the younger adult women of the settlement, who often went to the

grave with the bodies of their own newborn infants. The twenty-four-year-old woman in Burial 208 was part of a large, if not wealthy, House, one of eight women buried in the compound. Like all the women of her House, her head had carefully been shaped to enhance her appearance. She had little access to rare foods, the prerogative of the elder women of her group. But in death her House, never able to afford much mortuary display, provided her with multiple pottery vessels and figurines as a sign of respect to the House of the father of the child she died bearing, whose body was placed in the ground with her. With luck, other women of the House might cement the bonds that had begun with this marriage, and help to increase the power and resources of the House.⁷

Such strategies had worked for the Houses to the east, whose alliances with distant villages provided abundant exotic goods, and whose ability to retain married children and their offspring provided enough labor to support House members skilled in producing obsidian blades and elaborate cotton textiles. When a daughter of one of these houses died in full youth, like the woman in Burial 95, she could be buried with elaborate mortuary ritual attended by all the other Houses to which her own was allied, because her House had the wealth necessary for display, feasting, and hospitality. The beauty of her artificially shaped head, elaborately dressed hair, and young body was further enhanced with shell, jade, and iron-ore beads and pendants, and the red pigment sprinkled over her. Nineteen pots and ten figurines were disposed of in her burial, including some of the most elaborate in the village. In recognition of the importance of obsidian working in the history of her House, a single flake and a bone punch were added to the grave. Although young to die, at twenty-four, her mortuary rituals further cemented the ties to the House of her children's father, already forged over several generations.⁸

The rites accompanying the interment of her slightly older House sister in Burial 109 were more modest, befitting this woman's less untimely death and the lesser risk it posed to House alliances. Nevertheless, the House took care to mark her burial with the same signs of its history, bone punches and an obsidian core, and placed an animal mandible ornament to complement her beautifully shaped skull and finely filed teeth. She had already achieved an honored place in life, and the beginnings of decay in her teeth reflected the access she had enjoyed to sweet foods. The two pots placed with the body were the minimum required for the ceremony, but well made and no insult to the House to which she had borne children.⁹

At times a House invested more in the burial of a daughter who died at the brink of old age. The thirty-nine-year-old woman in Burial 130 was relatively healthy, despite the tooth decay she owed to the wealth of her House and her honored status within it. Her death, while not unusually early, was at a younger age than that of other women in the community, and she left behind a large number of children and grandchildren to mourn her. These descendants saw that she was accompanied by two dozen of the finest pots, and five figurines, and carefully placed her grinding stones in the burial. They dressed her in the clay rattles that she wore when, with the other mothers, she danced in recollection of her youth.¹⁰

In this, she was like the older woman of the western House, placed in Burial 157 accompanied by twenty-one pots and four whistles, wearing bone bead ornaments and her rattles. While the wealth of her House was less, and it lacked the wide external connections and active trading partnerships of the southeast House, it was equally proud of its history and respectful of the women who helped distinguish it from lesser neighboring Houses.

For most women in their late thirties, life was difficult and death was little marked. The women in Burials 105 and 115 were respectfully buried by the surviving members of their House, one with three pots, the other wearing shell beads and her rattle ornaments. However, both had already, by age thirty-nine, suffered serious spinal arthritis and tooth decay; the woman in Burial 105 had lesions on her jaw as well. While this House managed to mark the burials of younger women, on whom their alliances depended, with appropriate offerings of up to twenty pots and eleven figurines, and ornaments of shell and iron ore, it was not large enough to spare its elder women the hard labor that gradually deformed their spines and crippled their bodies.

Some singularly important women over forty were given prominent, isolated burials by the groups of Houses who recognized debts to them. The older woman in Burial 9 was covered in red pigment like a much younger girl and she had her stone pestle at her hand, and two dogs were killed to accompany her after death. She had practiced her craft of divination and curing for the village as a whole, and was no longer counted a member of a single House, but had ties to several. The skull of another older woman was recovered, burned, and placed in Burial 182 along with a single pot and a basalt yoke, emblem of the ritual ball game through which her head was identified with the sprouting seed of the underworld tree of life. No longer identified as a named person, she stood as a generalized representative of the founding ancestors ven-

erated by the Houses of the southeastern neighborhood, who had promised and delivered the knowledge of working obsidian to their descendants.¹¹

But most elderly women were buried more simply. The forty-four-year-old woman in Burial 189 wore a simple necklace of bone beads. The fifty-year-old woman in Burial 195 in the same group was placed in her grave with no imperishable ornamentation at all, and like her House sister had no pottery vessels or figurines in her grave. The extremely elderly woman in Burial 63, bent by severe spinal arthritis, although sufficiently well loved to be carefully buried, was also placed in her grave without ornament or elaboration. Unlike the younger women of Tlatilco, these older women had established their social memories through their lives, and through the names of their children and children's children and the passing on of family traditions and heirlooms (see Joyce 2000). No postmortem construction of a material history was required for them.

Burials and Social Memory

The details of biography of each of the women whose lives intersected the material record of Tlatilco are of course speculative, but something close to the considerations I have suggested above must have underwritten the creation of their distinct mortuary settings. These are a complex result of the actions of surviving members of the group on which the dead had claims for lasting care, and to which they represented a node in networks of social memory. Each woman's grave was utterly unique, with no repetition of precise numbers and kinds of artifacts, body position, or preparation of the grave. Yet each also exhibits subtle regularities that reflect the overall wealth of her group, the extent of its external links to sources of rare raw materials, the physical experiences of the deceased during life, and variation (related to age) in the disruptive effects death had on the social relations of survivors.

Teasing apart these different sources of variation is not as simple as statistically analyzing the burials to determine clusters of similar treatments, although precisely such a procedure originally drew my attention to the dimensions of variation that are most regular: the association of maximum burial elaboration with women between fifteen and nineteen years old, and of elderly women with the least pottery and greatest overall variability (cf. Joyce 1999, 2001:chapter 2, In press a). The failure of purely statistical procedures to exploit all the information in these burials is due, I would suggest, to the underlying assumption, necessary for the employment of the statis-

tical methods, that the burials are all members of a single population structured by a single common set of factors.

Instead, we can and surely must acknowledge that burial populations like this are a complex site for the construction by survivors of social memory that simultaneously binds together some of the living, connects them with the dead, and differentiates them from others, both living and dead, as kin and not-kin, peers and not-peers, individual persons and part of corporate groups. In my narrative representation of the variation among the burials I discuss here, I have highlighted three themes that continually reappear in ethnographic accounts of ceremonies linked to death: the emotional charge of beautification; the importance of memory and commemoration in the process of becoming an ancestor, and potential contention over the memory of the dead; and the individual and social experience of emotions of grief, regret, and acceptance of loss. I argue that archaeologists have abundant material available to consider, if not resolve, the significance of such phenomena in mortuary analysis.

By *beautification* I refer, following Munn (1986), to practices of ornamentation through which the bodies of the dead at Tlatilco were distinctively marked (Joyce 1999:19, In press a). Munn related beautification to the desire to enhance the attraction to and persuasiveness of a person. Ken George (1996:143–45), basing his analysis on the work of Georg Simmel (1950), discusses explicitly how adornment serves to distinguish a person and arouses both envy and admiration. The differential beautification of the deceased in burials at Tlatilco was not simply a reflection of reified status; it was an incorporation of a sensual appeal for mourners and others to appreciate the distinction of the dead person and the living members of her social House.

The production of social memory of the deceased was, I suggest, partly founded on the sensual impression of the experience of mortuary ceremonies. George (1996:186–200) emphasizes the sociality of commemoration and notes the equation of commemorative actions with adornment in the Indonesian setting of his ethnography. This would suggest that commemorative ceremonies were also open to the emotional play of persuasion, admiration, and envy evoked by personal adornment. Sergei Kan (1989:125–64, 186–212) describes the way that Tlingit funeral and commemorative ceremonies embodied distinctions between different social groups and individuals who stood in specific relations to the deceased, relations that were subject in some degree to contestation. One of the possible sources of variation in investment in mortuary treatment at Tlatilco, I suggest, was the desire to formally address potential claims by

different groups of mourners, potential claims that appear to have been most marked for young adult women as a whole and for women from specific social groups engaged more generally in competition for social distinction (Joyce In press a). The elaborate adornment of some young women, and the proliferation of objects placed in their graves, may be media through which the creation of their social memory as members of particular groups, ancestors in the making, was made persuasive.

Death initiated a complex series of adjustments including competition over the framing of the memory of the deceased. But it is well in the end to return to a consideration of the emotional reactions that death would have called into being and that mortuary rituals would have confronted and formalized. General anthropological discussions of death stress that the emotions associated cannot be assumed to be regular cross-culturally (Metcalf and Huntington 1991:2–5, 43–61). But Renato Rosaldo (1984) powerfully counters such a cautionary note with the observation that without consideration of the emotional experiences surrounding death, we necessarily produce accounts that divert our attention from powerful motivations for actions associated with death (see also Kan 1989:16–21). The emotional nexus surrounding death is only partly predictable from structural understandings: the emotions experienced by persons in particular relations to the deceased may follow general social expectations or depart from them. Mortuary rituals often provide a setting for the display of formally expected emotional reactions, and may simultaneously provide forms in which to express emotional states that are personal and idiosyncratic (Kan 1989:141–56; George 1996:103–10, 123–28).

My commentary on the Tlatilco burials attempts to suggest the possible existence of both personalized senses of grief and loss and more formalized and diffuse emotional attitudes toward the dead. I take as potential points of emotional focus the degree to which a death might have been unexpected and disruptive and the way that a death might have affected ongoing political negotiations between Houses. Because of the demographics of early agrarian villages, burial practices would have had a pervasive presence in the lives of the inhabitants of Tlatilco. Over their lifetimes, members of the society who survived to maturity could witness a number of deaths equal to the population of the entire settlement.¹² The death of close family members and neighbors would have been common, providing the ground for a profoundly different personal experience of death from that familiar to contemporary urban dwellers. As David Keightley (1998:776–77) writes, the members of such communi-

ties may have “accepted death, not as a violent affront to their expectations, but as a common, inevitable, and not inharmonious consequence of life itself.” Keightley (1998:777, 788–91) draws attention to the possible significance under these circumstances of expectations for continuing communication between living members of a group and the deceased. Susan Gillespie (In press) describes the relations of the living and the dead in the similar contexts of Classic Maya society as a matter of “curation, transformation, and regeneration” of persons who belonged to the house, and whose membership in it was not ended by the event of physical death (see also Hendon 2000; McAnany 1995). Mortuary practices at Tlatilco, then, may be thought of as initiating a new stage in the life course of individual group members and their relations with others, and as reiterating the membership of the deceased individual in the particular group. I do not discount feelings of loss that others in the community may have had when deprived of the kind of intimate face-to-face connection they had previously had with the now-transformed dead person. Nonetheless, I would suggest that consideration of the demographic situation reinforces the impression of mortuary rites at Tlatilco as a celebratory incorporation of the buried dead into the permanent place and memory of those who survived.

Burials deserve their privileged place in archaeology because they are one of the few locations where past ritual practices are preserved in structured form. But they do not passively *reflect* social reality at the time they were created. Instead, they were active media for the constitution of social relations in ongoing time: points in individual biographies that were partly freed from individual biography to become strands in wider social histories, not only through oral tradition but also through their physical reworking over time. Providing precedent for later practices, burials allowed the construction of relations of continuity through repetition. They facilitated the linking of historical practice to place, through their permanent emplacement in locations whose character derived in part from the presence of the dead.

Acknowledgments

The first version of my analysis of the Tlatilco burials was presented in 1993 at the Dumbarton Oaks Precolumbian Studies Symposium “Ritual Behavior, Social Identity and Cosmology in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica.” I would like to thank David C. Grove for inviting me to co-organize this symposium and encouraging me to work on the Tlatilco burials. The first attempt at a more narrative presentation of the lives of

women of Tlatilco was presented in 1994 at the conference “Gender in Ancient America,” organized by Cheryl Claassen, at Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina. I appreciate the positive reception given the presentation by the participants at that conference. Finally, I thank Meredith Chesson and Ian Kuijt for the invitation to participate in the AAA session in 1997 that led to the present volume, and the discussants in that session, Susan Kus, Ken George, and Tom Dillehay, for the inspiration provided by their comments.

Notes

1. While archaeologists recorded other burials in other seasons of work at Tlatilco, those from season IV are the only ones for which full professional osteological examinations have been completed and published. In addition to the eighty-six burials identified as female, this sample included seventy-seven burials identified as male (36 percent) and forty-nine (23 percent) of uncertain sex, the majority of these (40 burials, 19 percent) infants and juveniles (age estimates through 14 years old). (Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.)

2. When we label the practice of shaping the skull “deformation,” we project an assessment of value that is almost certainly the opposite of that internal to the society, where a particular appearance was valued so highly that steps were taken to produce it in living bodies. The forms of cranial modification recorded at Tlatilco—tabular erect and tabular oblique—have mainly been treated as evidence for the existence of different cultural or ethnic groups. Thus, linking Burial 14A not to the other burials in the local group, but to a segment of the wider population recovered at the site follows the traditional practice of treating the burial population as representative of a uniform cultural group. The shaping of the skull itself was most likely accomplished through the use of a cradle board in infancy, but the existence of multiple modes of head shaping strongly suggests we should consider this a practice of beautification, not simply an unexpected by-product of a technology of child care.

3. While by age she was a member of the same social cohort as the woman in Burial 14A, these two teenagers would have presented quite distinct physical appearance. The public evaluation of individual difference in appearance is one of the forces that I suggest led to the use of practices of beautification evident in the burials, as well as in figurines from the site (Joyce In press a).

4. The dental caries recorded for this burial, and others at the site, may be primarily attributable to the consumption of corn-based foods high in sticky carbohydrates that provide a medium for bacterial growth. For the popu-

lation as a whole caries was most strongly associated with more advanced age.

5. Here I accept Tolstoy's (1989) suggestion that the community of Tlatilco was organized in two social segments that we might recognize anthropologically as moieties, employing different preferred burial orientations. Ethnographically, ties between such social segments are reinforced through kinship, especially repeated marriages over generations (cf. McKinnon 1991:134–62, 199–226). Tolstoy suggested that the preferred postmarital residence pattern at Tlatilco was matrilineal, leading to the interpretation of the women as birth members of the localized group whose houses occupied the area where they were buried. I argue elsewhere that the body ornaments in Tlatilco burials were part of dance costumes worn in life-cycle rituals, and that these were material indications of investment in the life course of youths by their Houses (Joyce 1999, 2000, 2001:chapter 2, In press a).

6. The presence in a single deposit of multiple skulls is evidence of deliberate selection and treatment of a body part in an ongoing relationship to the dead whose remains would have been encountered in the reworking of the lived space of the house compound. The selection of cranial material is particularly interesting, given indications that the skull, or a representation of the skull or head, was the physical site of individuation of the person in Mesoamerica at this time (Joyce 1998b). Through the curation of skulls encountered during intentional or accidental reworking of house compound space, successors to this place physically concentrated the most personally significant body parts of predecessors, now transformed through death and primary burial into ancestors (cf. Kuijt this volume). I chose to label the infant *he* to mark the fact that in a matrilineal society both male and female offspring belong to the household of their mother. The presence of the infant mandible could represent the use of this body part as an ornament (cf. Joyce 1998b), but here I use it to raise the issue of the high health costs of maternity in premodern societies. Both male and female populations at Tlatilco were divided into age cohorts sharing burial practices and costume ornaments (Joyce 2001:chapter 2, In press a), but the cohorts of the female burial population were about five to ten years younger than the male cohorts with which they shared attributes. This conforms to the overall shorter life expectancy and higher mortality as young adults for females, both likely a result of the risks of childbirth for women. Maternal death would also have been an increased risk factor for unweaned infants whose principal source of protein would have been breast milk (cf.

Storey 1992), and the effects of the loss of the mother need not have been immediately evident. Thus I offer here the possibility that the 6-month-old child survived its mother's death only to succumb within months to nutritional stress and illness.

7. I use "rare food" here to refer to sweet food, most likely corn, which may be the cause of greater dental decay seen earlier in other individuals, such as the woman in Burial 29. The pattern in this burial cluster, of later evidence of dental decay, suggests that this sticky carbohydrate food was not a large part of the diet of the group so that its effects were manifest only at older ages.

8. As Susan McKinnon (1991:134–62, 199–226) demonstrates, in House societies a core of residents, related through a combination of descent, marriage, and patron-client links, cooperate in pursuit of the economic and social persistence of the house. Ceremonies recognizing sexual relationships or commemorating deceased house members are often settings for the circulation of named valuables between allied houses (McKinnon 1991:144–61; Munn 1986:124–38; Kan 1989:236–46). In the negotiation of alliances, individual and house interests may part ways, particularly in the desire to contract or recognize sexual relationships (McKinnon 1991:259–76). Such complex social dynamics are among the causes of the material traces on which we base archaeological interpretation (Joyce 1999, 2000).

9. Following the assumption that the clusters of burials represent dead members of a localized group, the woman in this burial was a member of the same social group, or House, as the woman in Burial 95. Labeling these people House sisters is an invocation of the contemporary concept of kinship as something created through action, rather than given by biological difference (see Schneider 1984, especially pp. 165–77). Susan Gillespie and I have explored how such a reworked notion of identification at the scale of the House has utility for bridging ethnography and archaeology (Joyce and Gillespie 2000, especially Joyce 2000). Differences in burial treatment within this cluster at Tlatilco, like the differences seen in the community as a whole, are primarily related to age. In the kind of small-scale, face-to-face ranked society that Tlatilco most certainly was, progress from junior to elder was a process both of gaining status and of resolution of some of the potential tension surrounding the negotiation of social alliances. I am suggesting that one of the reasons for the strong association of the most elaborate burials with young adults at Tlatilco is the social position of these people at the nexus of not-yet-consolidated relations between social groups.

10. Following the simple observation that it is the survivors of the dead who elaborate mortuary settings, I infer that the distinction accorded this older woman (when compared to others of her cohort) reflects a larger social network that paid respect to her at death. A reviewer took umbrage at this inference, parenthetically suggesting, “Maybe she was infertile?” While, as a woman without offspring myself, I would like to think my nieces and nephews will care as deeply about my death as I and my siblings did about those of our parents, I really find relatively uncontroversial the assumption that this woman had successors for whom she was someone to commemorate. Of course, since I am talking about House descendants—who need not have been her biological offspring—the point is really moot. Perhaps, in such a village, lives were in some ways more thickly connected than in contemporary North American society. It is, of course, necessary to recognize that in such a village death may have been more common and experienced less as a loss than as an expected life event (see my discussion of the work of David Keightley, below, for more on this possibility).

11. Here I am building on the idea that truly unique characteristics represent achievements of the individual, an assumption based on the processual approach to mortuary analysis that sees burials as reflecting social personae of the deceased (Binford 1971; Brown 1995; Saxe 1970). The suggested associations with divination, curing, and ritual follow general evidence in later Mesoamerican societies for the practice of specializations of this sort by older women (see Joyce 2001, In press b). The items found with these women are extremely evocative, but their very rarity makes their interpretation inherently most speculative. To leave these outliers out of consideration, however, would be to artificially simplify the dynamics of ancient Tlatilco; and once the decision was made to examine even these unusual cases, it became possible to see that these unique burials were similar in their anomalous spatial locations and age cohort.

12. I am indebted to Professor David Keightley for drawing my attention to the sheer scale of encounters with death in premodern agrarian villages and for sharing the results of his consultation with demographers to confirm this general proposition.

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