

Remembering One and All: Early Postclassic Residential Burial in Coastal Oaxaca, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Residential burial at Río Viejo marked deceased adults as members of particular houses and as witnesses and actors within the world of the living after their physical deaths. The standardization in burial locations, positions, and offerings emphasized the group identity of Río Viejo adults and their shared house histories. The simultaneous commitment to keeping individual bodies separate and intact, however, indicates that this group identity was not achieved through the subjugation of individual identities. Instead, at Río Viejo, the deceased were celebrated as a cohort of ancestors made up of unique individuals, rather than as a single-minded collective group. [residential burial, Mesoamerica, ancestors, social identities, age]

Two important, seemingly antithetical, interpretations emerge in archaeological study of mortuary practices. One is that burial practices say something unique about a deceased person's social position or individual identity in life. This perspective is most closely linked to the Saxe-Binford approach (see Adams and King, chapter 1, this volume), whereby burials and grave offerings provide important data for understanding individual identity and social hierarchies in past societies (Binford 1971; Saxe 1970). However, another common interpretation is that mortuary rituals make statements about collective membership in particular social groups or communities in part by de-emphasizing social ranking (e.g., Parker Pearson 2000). According to this interpretation, burial practices largely reflect (and help to construct) widely shared community norms, and mortuary rituals emphasize group identities by focusing on the similarities between people in death. In cases where burial occurs in shared living space, such as within residential areas and below house floors, it is tempting to lean toward the latter interpretation and argue that mortuary practices say something about group membership and group identity. In this chapter, I explore mortuary practices at the site of Río Viejo, in coastal Oaxaca, Mexico (Figure 4.1), to show how both in-

terpretations apply. At Río Viejo, residential burial became an intrinsic part of the creation of strong group identities associated with house membership, yet it did so while still preserving the opportunity to celebrate individual identity. Schiller (2001), in an ethnographic study of mortuary monuments and identity in Indonesian Borneo, argues a similar point about the *tiwah* ritual. During *tiwah*, bones of the dead are exhumed and redeposited inside a mausoleum along with much fanfare and celebration. She argues that the communal celebration of *tiwah* helps to “create and foster sentiments of affinity, on the one hand, and of estrangement on the other” and is an important space in which notions of Ngaju identity are negotiated (Schiller 2001:78). The mortuary practices at Río Viejo allowed for similar kinds of identity negotiations. Burial within residential structures conceptually harnessed the social, economic, and political power of deceased house members in service of the collective group, while at the same time the firm adherence to maintaining nonoverlapping grave spaces created a simple, yet elegant means of acknowledging individual identity. Residential burial at Río Viejo communicated the identities of both individuals (*one*) and the group (*all*) by simultaneously emphasizing difference and sameness.

In ancient Mesoamerica, ancestors played important roles in the everyday lives of living peoples and residential burial was a common practice (Hendon 1999; Joyce 1999; McAnany 1995; Ruz Lhullier 1968). In Mesoamerican cosmology, the cultural, natural, and spiritual worlds were not sharply divided and a deceased person's ties to the living did not end with death (Houston et al. 2006; Léon-Portilla 1963; McAnany 1995). Burial within the house expressed the connections between the deceased and the living both figuratively and physically. Mortuary practices at the site of Río Viejo are no exception. Although Río Viejo was once a political capital and regional headquarters with sharply delineated social hierarchies (Joyce 2008), circumstances had changed by the Early Postclassic. Dating to between C.E. 975 and C.E. 1220, the Early Postclassic occupation of the site was much smaller, restricted to a few residential neighborhoods without any evidence for hierarchical social ranking (King 2003). In one neighborhood at the site, deceased adults were interred beneath the floors of houses, a practice that incorporated the deceased as witnesses and actors within the world of the living after their physical deaths. Here, burial within the confines of separate house structures marked specific people as the deceased ancestors of particular houses. Yet at the same time, the similarity in burial treatment across the site reinforced a common, shared community history incorporating both the living and the dead and tying the members of separate households to one another.

Evidence for residential burial in coastal Oaxaca extends back to the Late to Terminal Formative periods (100 B.C.E.) (Barber 2005; Joyce 1994). In highland Oaxaca, residential burial was a practice in use from the Middle Formative to the Classic period (500 B.C.E.–C.E.800) (Barber 2005; Drennan 1976:129; Lind and Urcid 2010:100; Winter 1995). The manner in which subfloor residential burial was executed at Río Viejo, however, is unique and compelling for two reasons. First, the mortuary sample at Early Postclassic Río Viejo shows that only adults (or people above the age of 17 or so) were buried beneath house floors. The two child burials that were found were both placed outside the confines of house walls, showing that children and adults were treated in distinct manners. Residents seem to have made a conceptual distinction between intramural space and outside space, with children buried *outside* of the confines of specific house structures, separated from at least some adults in death. I have explored this distinction between child and adult burial in a separate publication, but will summarize it again here since it is important for understanding the meaning and significance of residential burial at Río Viejo (King 2006).

Second, residential burial at Río Viejo is unique because the subfloor burials were precisely planned and standardized, such that no burial impacts another. All individuals are buried in similar positions with similar offerings, and the burial ritual depended on the knowledge and remembrance of previous grave locations. While the inclusion of only adults in residential burials signals something important about membership in households, the planning within particular houses and standardization across the site suggests both individual and generalized ancestors were subjects of commemoration. In this chapter, I focus primarily on this latter aspect of coastal Oaxacan residential burial and argue that both individual and group identities were celebrated and commemorated simultaneously. The precise and enduring memory of grave locations of specific deceased adults shows that it was important for the living to honor and maintain the integrity of each particular deceased relative's individual identity, while the striking standardization reveals strong community burial standards and recognition of shared group identity. Burial in similar ways serves to reference and celebrate collective house memories by transforming deceased house members into generalized house ancestors. The statement that is being made through separate burial locations and the shared mortuary rites is that each deceased house member stood on his or her own and as part of the group simultaneously. Burial within residential boundaries shows that both individual and collective social action were most appropriately mediated through the house.

The Early Postclassic Mortuary Sample

The Early Postclassic occupation of Río Viejo consists of clusters of houses distributed in multiple residential neighborhoods. The houses were built directly on top of the monumental remains of the abandoned Late Classic period acropolis associated with the former regional urban capital, dating to roughly C.E. 500–800 (Figure 4.2). The new houses that Early Postclassic residents constructed were modest wattle-and-daub, single-room structures with stone foundations on top of the Classic period ruins, which at times incorporated stone construction material, including a broken carved stone stela fragment and groundstone tools, from earlier occupations. In these clustered neighborhoods, residents established a stable and enduring community based in part on the success of household social relationships, community-wide religious rituals, and craft production focused on cloth, figurines, jewelry, musical instruments, and costume ornaments. Early Postclassic residents participated in interregional exchange networks that supplied coastal

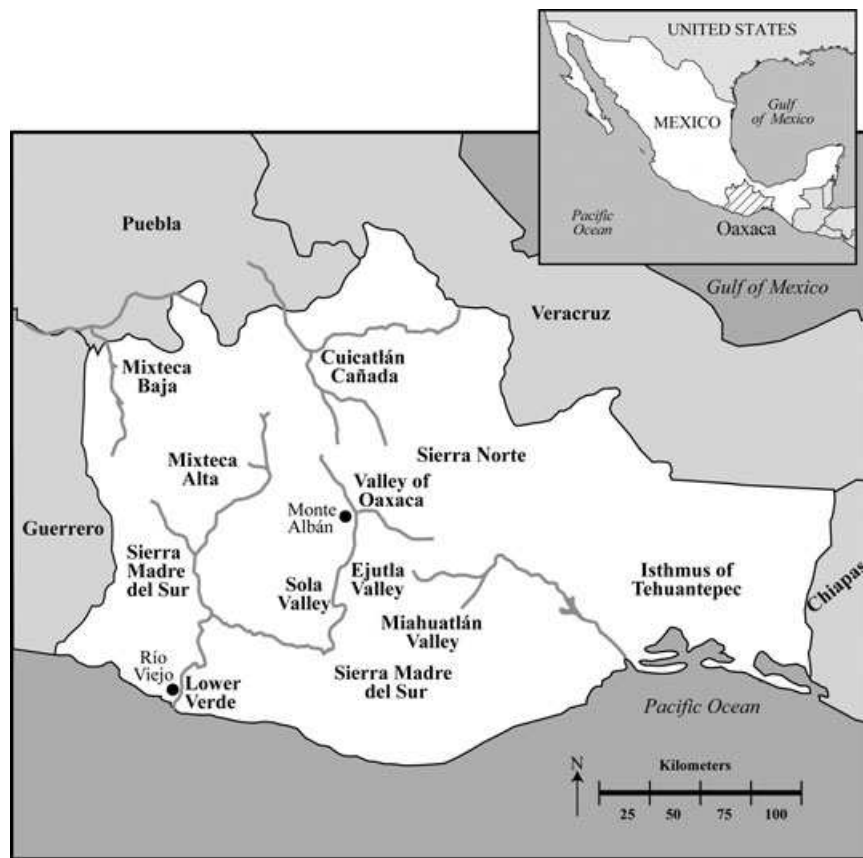


Figure 4.1. Map of Oaxaca showing the location of Río Viejo.

cotton thread to highland Oaxaca (King in press). In return, Río Viejo residents received obsidian from several different highland sources, which was manufactured into blade tools and used by every household in the community. These exchange routes probably extended through the highland Mixteca Alta region, connecting Río Viejo both economically and socially to the large Early Postclassic centers of Cholula and Tula and the greater Postclassic Mesoamerican world (King 2008a).

In 2000, I directed the excavation of one of these neighborhoods, which included portions of six house structures dating to the Early Postclassic, along with a full suite of domestic artifacts and the mortuary remains of 16 individuals (Figure 4.3). Arthur Joyce directed the excavation of a second contemporaneous neighborhood, uncovering portions of five additional house structures and four burials (Joyce et al. 2001; Joyce and King 2001). The burial patterns in the two neighborhoods were quite different. The Operation A sample excavated by Joyce included two child burials, both of which were interred outside of buildings in flexed positions, an adult male buried outside a structure with no offerings, and two adults interred underneath a patio (one

of which may have been part of a sacrificial ritual). By contrast, all 16 Early Postclassic burials found in the Operation B neighborhood were the result of primary burial events and included only one individual (Table 4.1). Each body was placed in the ground in a similar way, extended on the back, head to the south, with arms resting either alongside the torso or crossed on the abdomen. The presence of diagnostic Early Postclassic ceramic vessel offerings interred with most of the deceased confirms the association of this burial pattern and these burials with the Early Postclassic. Large fragments of broken ceramic vessels similar to those placed in the burials were found in a midden in Operation B that yielded a calibrated radiocarbon date between C.E. 1035 and C.E. 1187 (two-sigma variation, AA40040, reported in King 2006).

Most of the Early Postclassic burials in Operation B were interred beneath the floor of a single house, Structure 8–8b (Figure 4.4). The structure measures 5 by 11 meters, and is rectangular with the long axis running east to west. Within this structure, bodies were laid out side by side across nearly the entire subfloor area of the building, paralleling the north–south–running structure walls. All individuals were

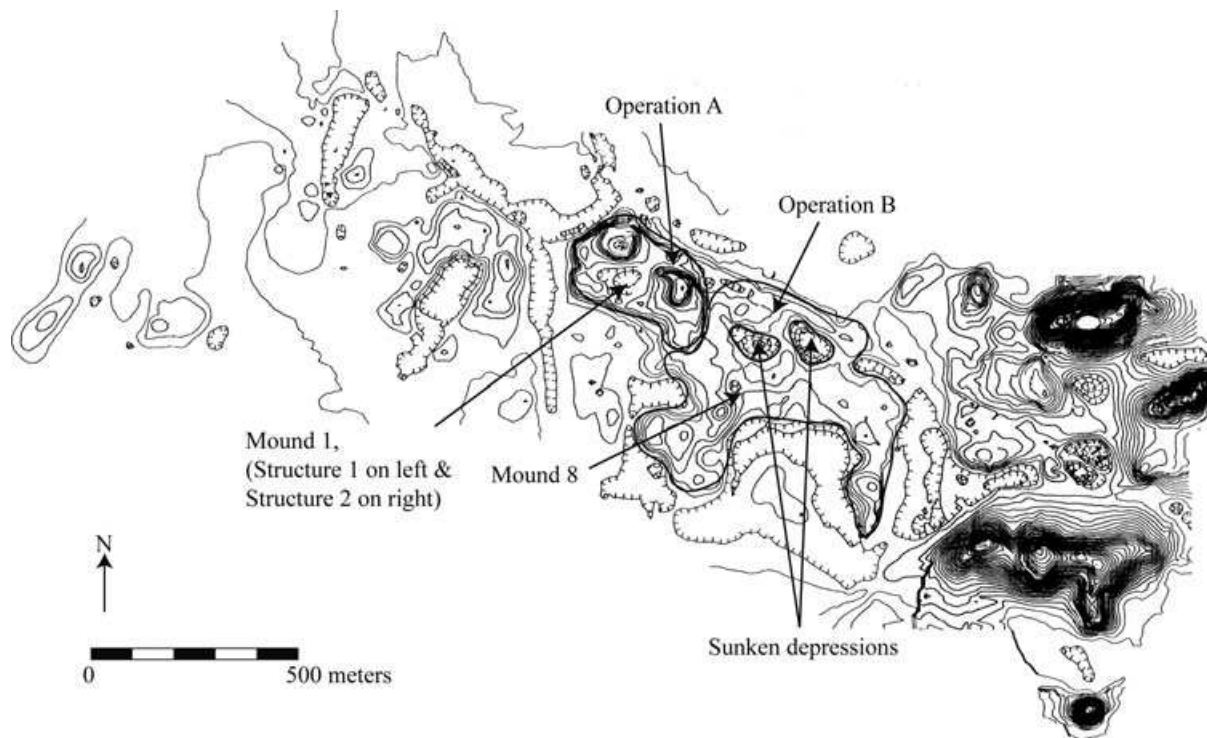


Figure 4.2. Plan view of Río Viejo, showing the location of the Operation A and Operation B neighborhoods.

oriented similarly with their heads to the south. This placement is seemingly purposeful so as to fit more burials in the space, forming a rough row of bodies across the length of the structure, as shown in Figure 4.4.

The remaining five burials were uncovered beneath the floor of Structure 8–7, in nearly identical positions, although in this case the long axis of the 5-by-11-meter structure runs north–south rather than east–west (Figure 4.5). This created a slightly different burial plan whereby multiple rows were possible. Only in a few locations within the excavation limits did we clear to the level where the burials are found (below the house floor). Additional rows of burials may exist in the northern half of the structure, which is outside the excavation limits, and in the southernmost section of the structure, where we did not excavate below the house floor. Had we excavated the entire house to the levels below the floor surface, we may have located additional burials.

The Early Postclassic burial patterns are quite distinct from burial practices in earlier time periods in the lower Río Verde valley. Among the 102 burials from Late and Terminal Formative period residential zones at the site of Cerro de la Cruz (Joyce 1991b, 1994), subfloor and subpatio burial was common, but there the burials included primary and secondary burials and single- and multiple-individual burials of people of all ages and sexes. Burial positions

were either flexed or extended, and burial orientations varied, most often running parallel to structure walls. The Classic period sample includes 30 individuals recovered from test pits at the site of Río Viejo, or intrusive deposits at Cerro de la Cruz (Christensen 1999; Joyce 1991a, 1994), and again exhibits great variation in number, context, and orientation. The Early Postclassic pattern of placing the dead in single, primary burials in highly standardized, similarly oriented, nonoverlapping graves is highly distinct.

Residential Burial and House Membership

As mentioned earlier, burial beneath house floors and within residential zones is a common practice across Mesoamerica. Most recently, scholars have linked the practice of subfloor burial to ancestor worship or ancestor veneration, which is connected to the belief in a fluid boundary between life and death in Mesoamerican cosmology (Geller 2006; Gillespie 2002; McAnany 1995; Manzanilla 2002; Miller 1995; see also Smith 2002:112, in which the lack of burials beneath house floors at Aztec sites is used to argue that Aztecs did not practice ancestor veneration). Subfloor burials provided living people with daily access to the ancestors and gave them spiritual support. At the same time, the

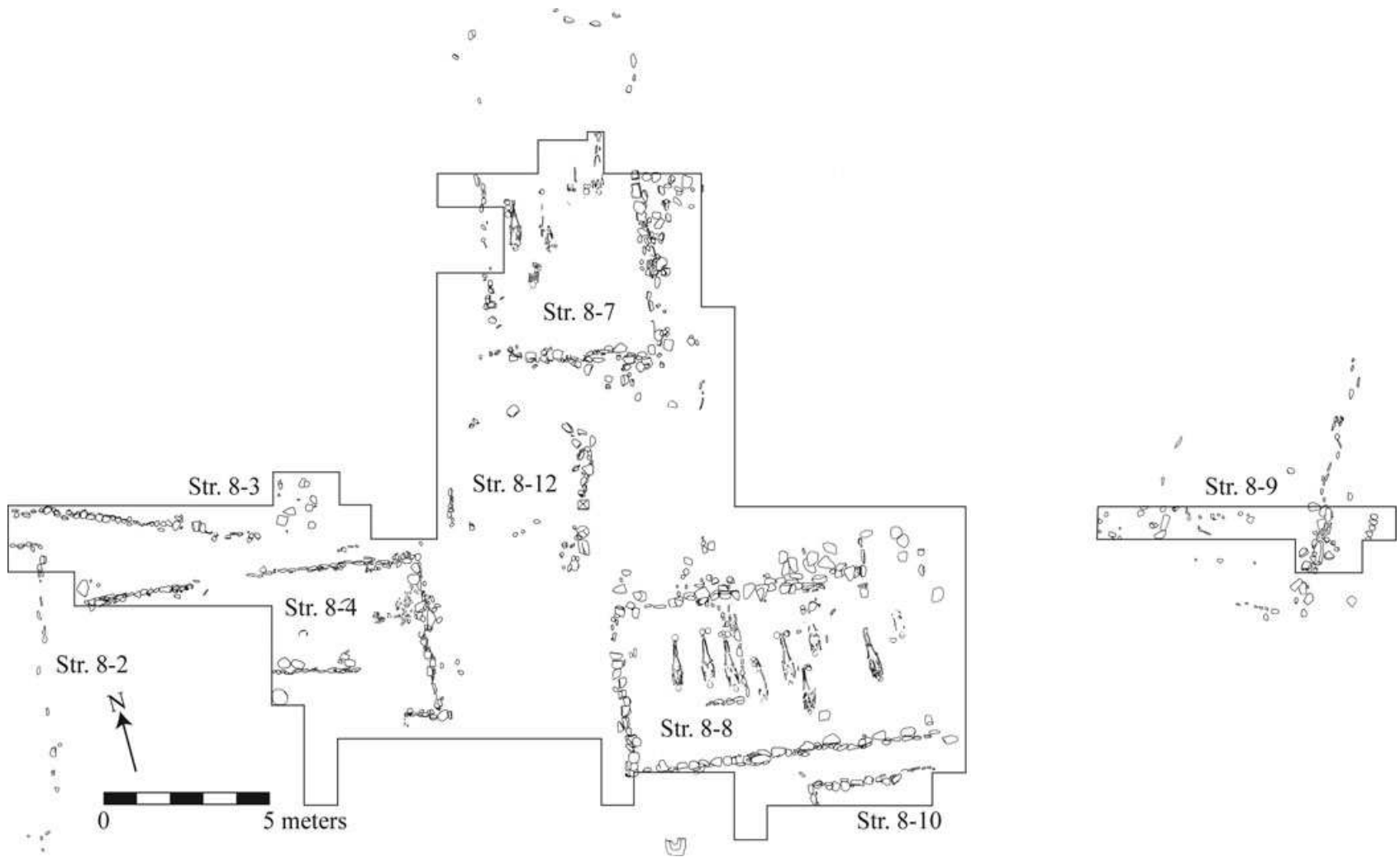


Figure 4.3. Plan view of the Operation B neighborhood, Río Viejo.

Table 4.1. Mortuary Data for the Early Postclassic Burials Found in Operation B, Río Viejo

Burial	Indv	Location	Sex*	Age**	Orientation	Vessels	Other Offerings
26	34	Str. 8-8	x	a	8° W of N	2	
27	35	Str. 8-8	x	a	4° E of N	0	3 obsidian blades and 1 quartz burnisher
28	36	Str. 8-8	m	a	4° W of N	3	
29	37	Str. 8-8	x	sa	7° E of N	2	
30	38	Str. 8-8	x	a	4° E of N	2	1 quartz burnisher
31	39	Str. 8-8	f?	a	4° E of N	2	
32	40	Str. 8-8	m	a	6° E of N	2	
33	41	Str. 8-8	x	a	7° E of N	2	
34	42	Str. 8-8	x	a	6° E of N	1?	
35	43	Str. 8-8	m	a	2° E of N	0	
37	45	Str. 8-8	unexc.			1	
43	52	Str. 8-7	f	a	17° E of N	3	
45	54	Str. 8-7	x	a	22° E of N	0	
46	55	Str. 8-7	m	a	9° E of N	1	5 shell pendants
50	59	Str. 8-7	x	a	12° E of N	1	
53	62	Str. 8-7	unexc.	a		2	

*Sex categories: x = indeterminate, m = male, f = female, unexc. = unexcavated.

**Age categories: a = adult, sa = subadult.

emotional and physical proximity of ancestors also served as a constant reminder of proper behavior—and, as Gillespie (2001, 2002) has argued, gave those still living access and rights to the material (and nonmaterial) property of their ancestors. Keeping the deceased buried within the house not only kept close the physical remains of ancestors, but also encapsulated and controlled the intangibles of wealth, status, and privilege that formed important parts of each ancestor's individual and group identities. In this way, the architectural space of the house structure was linked closely to the social landscape of the house (Kuijt 2001:89, 2008). The standardization in mortuary ritual present at Río Viejo can be interpreted as both reinforcing and reflecting community and generational continuity (Kuijt 2001; McAnany 1995), and especially pertinent to this case, the spatial location of residential burials within *separate* house buildings differentiates one house from another. What this creates is a sense of separation (“estrangement” in the words of Schiller 2001:78) at the same time that it creates connections between the houses and house ancestors (“affinity” in the words of Schiller 2001:78).

Residential burial is linked to both house membership and house identity (Hendon 1999). Here, I am adopting a house-centered approach (see Gillespie 2007:27) for talking about social organization at Río Viejo that draws on archaeological applications of Claude Lévi-Strauss' house societies model (notably Gillespie 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Joyce 2000; and essays in Beck 2007). Rather than a strict adoption of the specific model of house societies that Lévi-Strauss developed (Lévi-Strauss 1982:176–187), what I think is most

useful for this case study is how the framework connects physical (material) traces of houses, a flexibly defined, yet meaningful and ethnographically grounded social group, and the everyday practices or activities that help to maintain house continuity. In house societies, all members of a house have rights and access to the tangible and intangible property, wealth, status, and privilege that is passed down through the house. This property is often communicated through a physical house structure (architecture), heirlooms, and the material remains of small-scale social relations (Joyce 2007:54). Although Río Viejo houses were not especially wealthy, the emphasis on house membership is most evident in distinctive burial practices and the distribution of activities relative to architecture. Most people in the neighborhood participated in similar kinds of everyday economic activities, but some activities, including the highly symbolic task of food preparation, were completed within specific house structures. Activities, food production, burial, and residence are all connected to the construction of a shared corporate house identity.

In the lower Río Verde valley, residential burial was common throughout the entire sequence of occupation (Joyce 1991b, 1994; King 2006). Unlike in earlier time periods, at Early Postclassic Río Viejo, residential burial specifically targeted adult members of the community (King 2006). Remains of children (or of anybody under the age of 17) were notably absent from subfloor burial and from burial within the limits of house structures. In the Operation A neighborhood, two children were found buried outside of residential space, and we have not yet located any children buried in

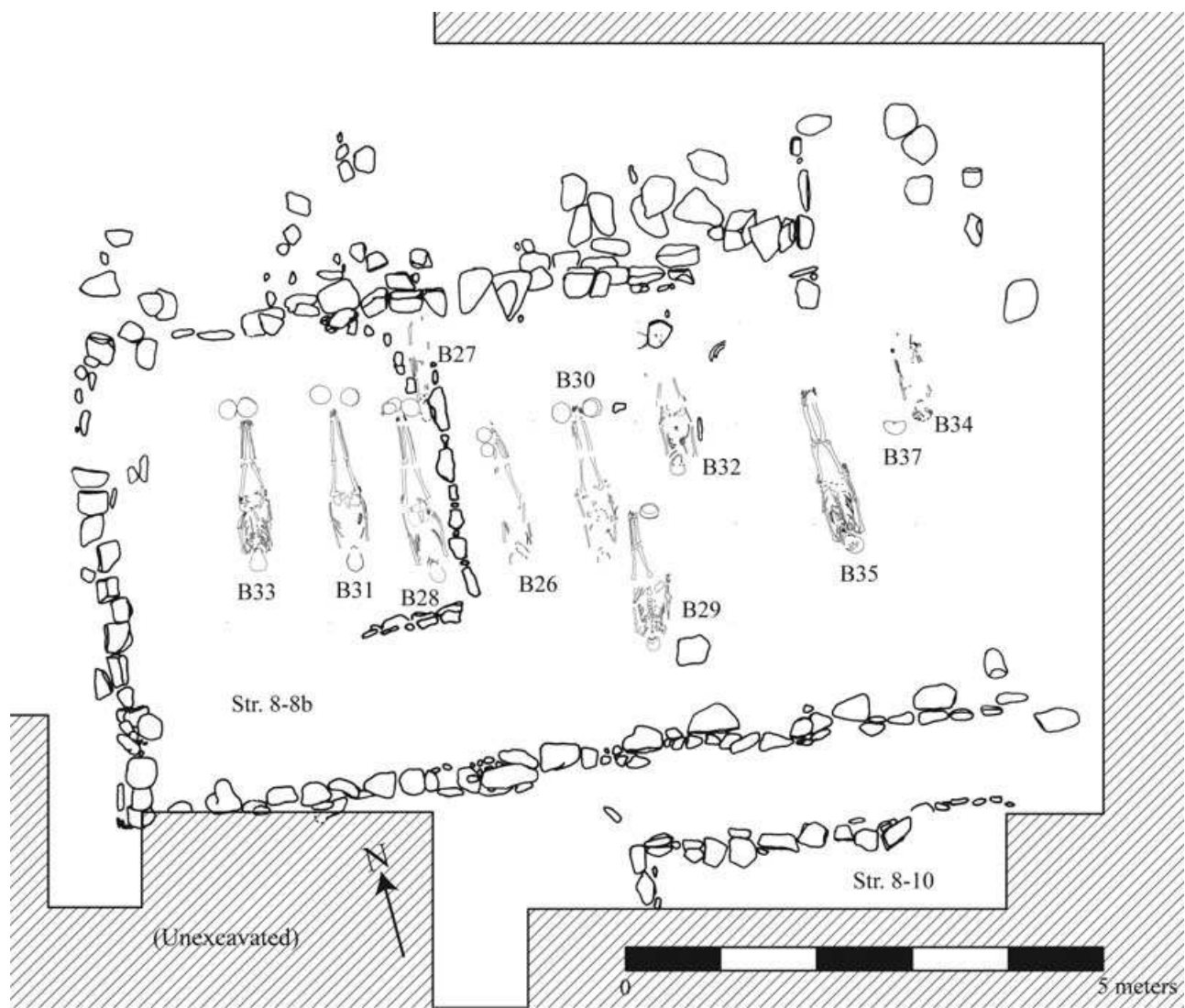


Figure 4.4. Plan view of Structure 8-8b, Operation B, Río Viejo.

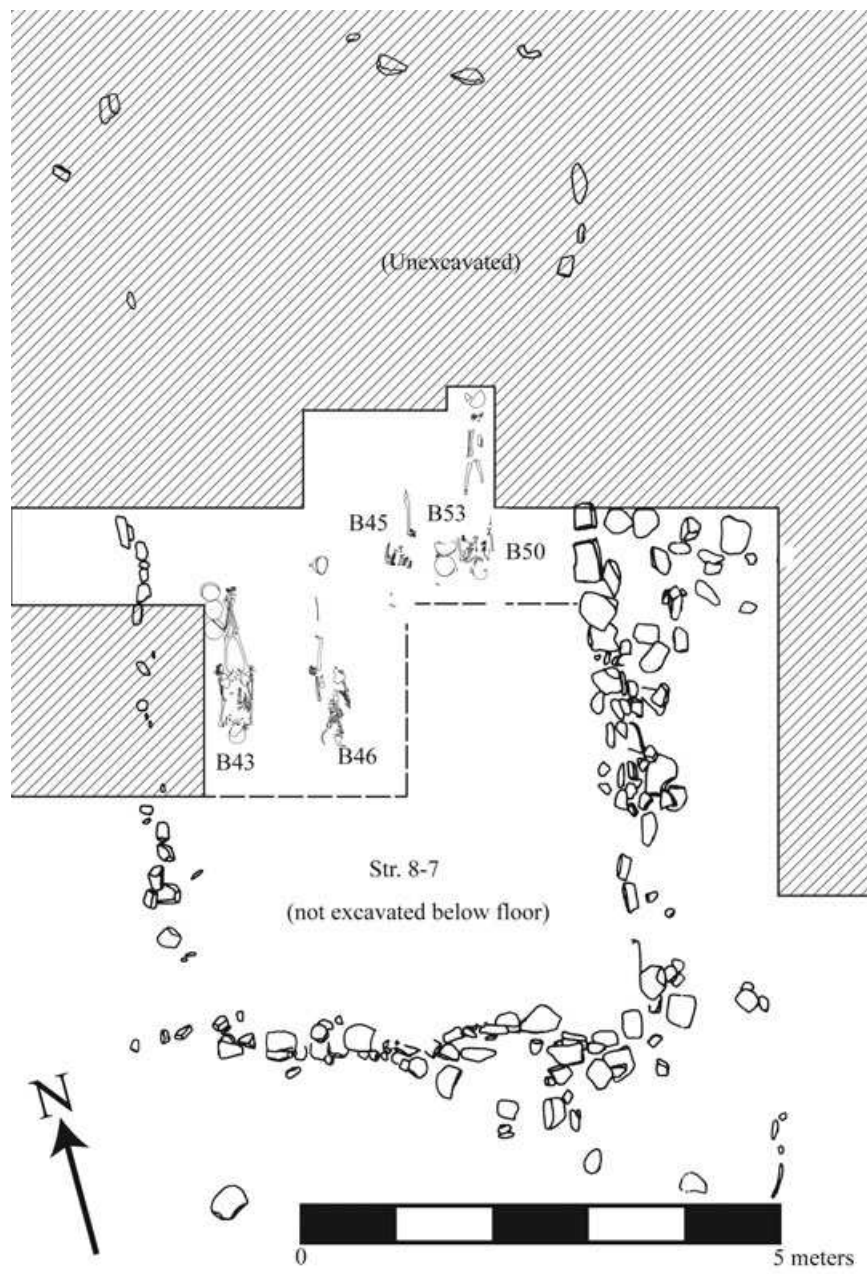


Figure 4.5. Plan view of Structure 8-7, Operation B, Río Viejo.

the Operation B neighborhood. I have argued elsewhere that the absence of children in subfloor burial within the limits of house space is indicative of the place of children in Early Postclassic Río Viejo and their membership in houses (King 2006). It may have been the case that in order to attain membership in a house or serve as a legitimate house ancestor, one needed to reach a certain age or age grade. In this way, only adults (as defined by Early Postclassic house residents) could appropriately serve as house ancestors. This separa-

tion between children and adults in residential burial shows that only adults could provide certain kinds of services to the group and only adults had access to certain kinds of property, rights, and privileges or deserved a particular kind of commemorative practice. Regardless of what the distinction means, that the distinction exists marks a conceptual separation between child and adult burials and mortuary ritual. Uruñuela and Plunket (2002:29) note a similar division between adult and child burial locations at Formative period

Tetimpa, Puebla, and cite Ravesloot (1988:18) in suggesting that children may have required different burial treatment because they had not yet participated in initiation rites that would have allowed them to enter the adult social sphere.

I have also argued the possibility that children occupied a more flexible and tenuous position in the community, whereby they were perhaps considered members of multiple houses until they reached a particular age-status (King 2006). If Río Viejo residents practiced the bilateral kinship system widely suggested for peoples of Oaxaca (Nader 1969:347–348; Spores 1967:10; Whitecotton 1977:153), parents would have come from different houses of origin, and a child's position and identification with a specific house might not have been predetermined. If a child died prematurely before ties were established to a particular house, this could have foreclosed their opportunity to belong to a particular house and be buried within house space. I argued that, for this reason, it might have been more common for children to be buried in open, non-house spaces, as evidenced in the Operation A neighborhood (King 2006). Because a child's position within one house might not yet have been determined, the death of that child could have brought together a larger and more diverse group of mourners from multiple houses and could have required a more public, open-access venue for mortuary ritual. At the same time, the death of children could have been viewed as particularly dangerous, suspicious, or auspicious, such that it required a different set of mortuary practices in a spatially distinct, outside-of-house location. This would have limited the amount of contact or changed the form of contact between the spirits of these children and living kin, and would have kept deceased children from interacting regularly with living house residents in the same way as those persons buried beneath the floor.

Adult burials were highly standardized, with adult male and female individuals placed in nearly identical positions, extended on their backs, oriented with their heads to the south, feet to the north, and with their arms either at their sides or crossed. Most individuals were interred with between one and three ceramic vessels placed around their feet, some of which were obviously used prior to interment, as evidenced by their broken supports or well-worn *molocajete* (grinding) surfaces (King 2003). Maize phytoliths were present in at least one of these vessels, demonstrating that a maize-based food was either presented to the dead or shared among participants in funerary rites, or that well-used and/or unwashed vessels were selected as offerings (see also Joyce 1999:20; King 2008b). Grave goods other than ceramic vessels were much less common, but do occur. One individual wore jewelry (shell pendants), one had obsidian blades placed inside the mouth, and two others had well-worn, heirloom quartz burnishers used in ceramic

production placed beneath their heads. Rather than marking wealth, I suspect that these offerings subtly and less visibly referenced individual identities. These grave goods occur too infrequently to reveal a particular meaning-bearing pattern, such as patterning with respect to sex of the individual. In fact, a comparison of these burials with burials from earlier periods in coastal Oaxaca reveals that sex-specific differences in grave goods have never been statistically significant in coastal Oaxacan assemblages throughout all time periods (King 2006).

Individuals buried within structures tend to be buried with offerings across all time periods, while extramural burials often lack grave goods; however, this relationship is not statistically significant. This pattern is most clear for the Early Postclassic, when deceased individuals buried beneath house floors were nearly always buried with grave goods (14 of 16, or 81.3 percent), while burials found outside structures (those in Operation A) were buried with none. The possible correlation between grave location and grave offerings in the Early Postclassic could support the interpretation that people buried beneath house floors might have had unique access to wealth, status, property, and privilege associated with being a house member or an important house ancestor, even though the offerings are admittedly quite meager. The dead buried outside house floors were exempt from such status, which affected both where they could be buried and what kinds of objects could be included as offerings (King 2006). Alternatively, since the burials found in the Operation A neighborhood did not follow the same pattern of under-floor burial, one could argue that the spatial separation and differences in mortuary ritual between the two neighborhoods mark some sort of qualitative difference between the residents of each—perhaps different ancestors, origins, traditions—that is masked by the similarity in house architecture and spatial configuration, economic practices, and material culture (Joyce and King 2001; King 2003).

The houses at Río Viejo were not static and unchanging throughout the Early Postclassic. Multiple people lived in the houses and people moved around between houses through time—such that residential burial was a common and repeated part of the life cycles of houses. Houses were occupied before, during, and probably after burial events, and were not constructed solely for the purpose of “housing” the deceased. They were multipurpose structures that encapsulated and encoded different forms of social behavior and traditions. In the Operation B neighborhood, the separation of the subfloor burials among two distinct house structures might suggest a social division into two different houses, each with its own set of members and important, remembered ancestors. At the same time, the overall similarity in the mortuary ritual across the neighborhood shows

that strong community standards and traditions governed the treatment of the dead and connected each house to one another.

Individual and Collective Identity among House Ancestors

Burial practices in the Operation B neighborhood of Río Viejo show that one of the important references being made in residential burial was membership in the house. These practices foreground a deceased adult's collective group identity as a house member and house ancestor over his or her individual identity in life or death. While some aspects of individuality are maintained (as evidenced by the unique shell pendant and quartz burnisher grave offerings), the overall statement being made in death rites is about the similarity between adult male and female house members, group membership, and one's role as a house ancestor.

However, if we consider the locations of the burials more closely, we see at the same time the extreme precision and standardization in body position and the placement of each burial side by side one another, so that no body or burial event impacts or intrudes upon a previously interred individual. This precision is the complete opposite of the characteristic mortuary practices from earlier time periods in coastal Oaxaca. Here, as in other parts of Oaxaca, tombs and graves were often frequently reused, scattering or otherwise pushing aside the bones of earlier interments (Martínez López et al. 1995:236; Middleton et al. 1998; Miller 1995; Whalen 1981, 1988). The subfloor burials from Late and Terminal Formative period contexts in coastal Oaxaca often impacted and disturbed the remains of previously deceased individuals, creating noticeable palimpsests (Joyce 1991a, 1994). With reference to Valley of Oaxaca tombs, Miller (1995:241) argues that this kind of spatial reconfiguration of human skeletal elements and offerings in tombs was purposeful, so that the connections between the newly deceased individuals, "heads of household," and those still living could be (strategically and spiritually) rewritten and redefined. In coastal Oaxaca, the burial contexts were less formal earthen pits (not tombs), and so probably did not warrant or require restructuring of burial space to accommodate a newly deceased person. Instead, surviving family members chose to avoid already occupied space rather than to reconfigure old space. This means that living members of Early Postclassic houses who were burying deceased house members specifically avoided disturbing the remains of previously deceased individuals when interring newly deceased adults and likely knew and remembered the precise

locations of those previously interred. This precision calls into question the interpretation that the only important reference being made through residential mortuary practice was to collective identity and membership in a house (see King 2006).

The first issue that must be raised about this patterned spacing and separation of burials is whether the burial events were simultaneous or sequential—that is, did all of the individuals buried in these subfloor graves die around the same time, so that burial side by side would not have been a difficult pattern to create, or were they buried at different points in time? While I wish that the stratigraphy clearly demonstrated a sequence and separation in time between burial events, the lack of clear stratigraphic distinctions between burial fill, burial pit cuts, and the surrounding platform fill does not easily allow us to detect the timing of the different burial events. Grave pits were not distinguishable during excavation owing to both the fine texture of the deposits and the extreme heat, sun, and dry weather conditions that quickly baked the walls into hard clay. Thus, for the most part, we cannot order the burial events through time. In addition, unlike other places in Mesoamerica and across the globe, formal earthen burial chambers or plastered floor surfaces were not present to help distinguish one burial event from another. Combined with the lack of superimposition of the actual bodies, the lack of visible floor cuts makes reconstruction of the exact sequence and timing of interment difficult.

Pathological indicators and the age-at-death profile of the individuals buried beneath the floor surfaces give no indication that the burials were the result of a single traumatic mass-death event, such as a violent massacre or an epidemic. Instead, the skeletons exhibit normal signs of aging and degenerative bony afflictions such as osteoarthritis in the spinal column and in one case the hand, osteoporosis, wear on the teeth, and antemortem tooth loss. They also include individuals in both early and later adulthood.

At the same time, each burial was not exactly the same. Some bodies lie lower than others, and some appear wedged between two previously interred bodies. For example, Burial 28 is almost resting on its side to fit into the space between a stone wall from an earlier structure and Burial 31, suggesting that there is some time delay between each burial event (Figure 4.6). We also have evidence for architectural renovation and stratigraphic changes through time in the neighborhood that indicate that the Early Postclassic occupation of the site spanned multiple generations, equaling roughly 200 years. Therefore, it is most reasonable to argue that these burial events span the entire Early Postclassic occupation of particular houses and of the site in general. Given the lack of positive evidence for simultaneous burial,

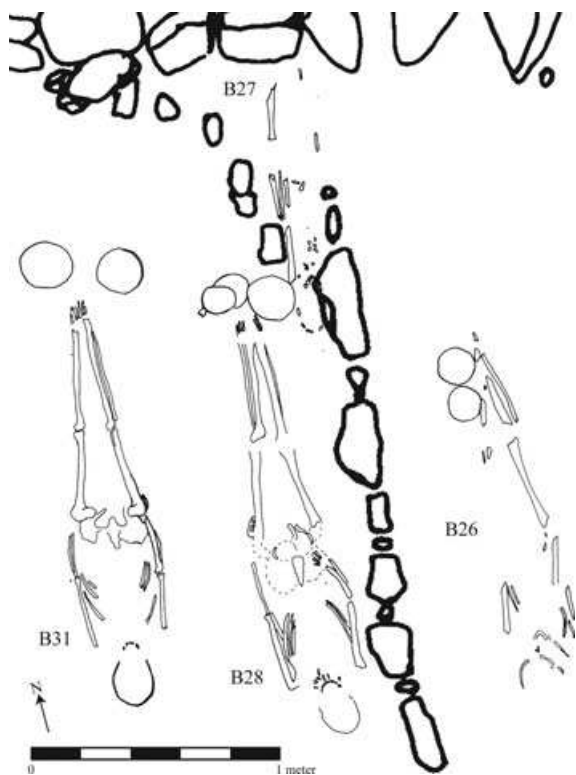


Figure 4.6. Close-up of burials in Structure 8-8b showing wedging of burial space, Operation B, Rio Viejo.

I feel most comfortable concluding that the burials are sequential. This would accord with the scenario of gradual death events over multiple generations in a residential setting and the extant accumulation of living debris on interior and exterior occupation surfaces.

Each burial chamber was a remembered location and the bodies of the deceased, or ancestors, occupied specific places beneath the floor and retained certain rights over that space. People avoided impacting or disturbing the remains of previously deceased ancestors when burying the newly deceased. This might perhaps indicate that people would have had reason to mark grave locations in some manner, perhaps with a semipermanent above-ground marker. Alternatively, the cuts and disturbed sediment of used graves might have remained visible in the floor surface for some time and thus the locations of graves were detectable and easy to remember. We found no evidence of archaeologically preserved above-ground grave markers, in the form of either portable or nonportable artifacts—that is, there is no evidence of constructed altars or markers made of nonperishable material such as stone—and filled grave cuts are no longer visible on floor surfaces.

Another possibility is that Río Viejo residents marked these locations with some sort of semipermanent or perish-

able marker that may not leave visible traces. To answer this question I refer to the results of the analysis of soil chemical residues from house floors and occupation surfaces at the site (King 2008b). In this study, I tested floor surfaces at one-meter intervals across the entire excavated area for 12 elements commonly associated with human settlements and human products such as perishable plants, animals, wood, food, and excreta, accumulating 435 archaeological samples. The method was chosen to examine the distribution, locations, and social implications of food processing and food sharing activities in Early Postclassic households (King 2008b). Although the sampling strategy and sampling interval, with samples taken at one-meter intervals on all interior and exterior occupation surfaces, might not have been fine enough to catch perishable burial markers, the soil chemistry results demonstrate no clear evidence of specific, repeated perishable grave markers placed above each grave. Further, a burn feature located in one of the houses containing burials, which I have interpreted as evidence of a small-scale, repeated food processing activity (King 2008b), was specifically positioned so that it did not directly overlie burials. The location of this feature suggests an avoidance of certain areas for specific non-burial activities.

These purposeful arrangements of burials and features leave open the possibility that a burial plan existed *before* people died—such that specific zones of the house were chosen as resting areas for specific adult members of the house, and specific areas were deemed appropriate burial areas for specific people. From the soil chemistry, we should be able to detect whether people were buried under patterned, meaningful locations within the house. For example, if people were buried beneath the floor area where they slept while alive, the residues of sleeping mats or evidence of a clean surface should be detectable. The chemical and phytolith results, however, do not support this conclusion (King 2003, 2008b). A preordained burial plan would explain not only the regular spacing but also larger, seemingly purposeful gaps between bodies in some parts of the houses. It seems that some locations were saved for later use and were never filled, perhaps because the families moved prior to the death of the individuals who would have been buried in those locations or because for some other reason the bodies of those deceased never made it back for burial.

The mortuary sample from Early Postclassic Río Viejo is far too small to identify distributional patterns in burial location based on the sex of the buried individual, especially since sex in most cases was difficult to determine due to poor preservation of the skeleton. Also, since there is little internal architectural differentiation within houses and most structures were single-roomed rectangular structures, there is no way to determine whether the positions of particular

kinds of burials (male, female, older adult, younger adult, etc.) are associated with burial beneath or next to specific kinds of architectural features (for example, the east wall, altar, center line). The lack of patterned differentiation in grave offerings also suggests that wealth or status was not a predictable determinant of burial in a certain location.

Regardless, residents of Río Viejo maintained the integrity of specific burials and remembered where to bury (or where not to bury) the next person who passed. From an interpretive standpoint, the commitment to keeping individual bodies complete and the protection of specific resting places for specific ancestors perhaps show that the effort to treat adult male and female burials similarly and thus create generic adult house ancestors was not achieved through the *subjugation* of individual identity. Instead of forced sameness, the sense of community and corporate identity was achieved through the celebration of specific individuals, which kept individuals distinct and separate from one another and yet treated them all in the same manner.

Ancestors were important at Río Viejo—not as a generic collective group referencing house identity, but as individual people who together formed a cohort. In this sense, the actions of living house members were monitored and witnessed not by a group of generalized ancestors who acted as one on behalf of their shared house identity, but by the musings, influence, and penetration of numerous, separate, specific ancestors. People lived under the watchful eye of multiple adult ancestors, whose individual identities were explicitly maintained, emphasized, remembered, memorialized, and protected within the context of and with reference to the group. The celebration of group identity in light of such difference and distinction makes the decision of living survivors to mark each body in a similar way upon death, de-emphasizing individual identity, even more powerful and meaningful. To be sure, residential burial at Río Viejo provided an intense link between living peoples and their remembered ancestors. Individual grave sites were acknowledged and commemorated in a way that linked all living house members and their ancestors together as a unified group, even though each group, the living and the dead, was composed of separate, uniquely celebrated individuals.

Conclusion

Both individual and group identity is implicated in residential burial at Río Viejo. Residential burial is not just a statement about who was considered a house member and who was not, but indicates that mortuary ritual was an ap-

propriate social means through which individual and group identities could be expressed, celebrated, and differentiated (Hendon 1999). The differences in burial practice and mortuary rites for people of different ages reinforced and perhaps celebrated a meaningful social distinction between children and adults. It also may indicate variation in the definition of residential burial, such that for some places, the distinction between intramural and extramural residential burial may indeed be important.

Houses were the social conduits for both group action and individual social practice. For the dead, residential burial placed deceased adult house members among a group of peers, and bestowed upon them the social recognition as important individual ancestors within a community of house ancestors. Owing to distinct burial locations away from or outside of houses, deceased children were both physically and conceptually separated from their adult counterparts. This might indicate that they were restricted from active participation as house ancestors or were different kinds of actors. The membership of children in specific houses may not yet have been solidified, to the degree that a different form of burial was required. Instead, residential burial recognized the positions of adults specifically as social individuals who witnessed, constrained, and celebrated the actions of those in the world of the living and celebrated their roles as preservers of collective house memory. For the living, residential burial was a way to remember *one* (specific persons) and *all* (the group of adult ancestors) at the same time, and to enact the claim that, in perpetuity, in life and in death, self, house, and community were important and interwoven expressions of identity.

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