

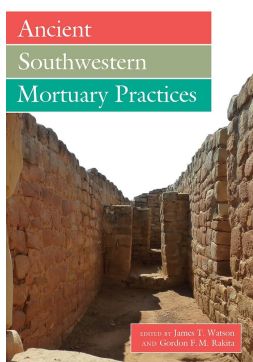


Note de lecture [<https://americae.fr/notes-de-lecture/watson-rakita-ancient-southwestern-mortuary-practices>]

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James T. Watson and Gordon F. M. Rakita (eds.), *Ancient Southwestern Mortuary Practices*

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Archéologie des Amériques (UMR 8096)

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1. *Ancient Southwestern Mortuary Practices* is best described as a synthesis, a collaborative undertaking derived from massive data collection and analysis projects driven by several researchers since 2011. As such, it follows in the footsteps of many previous works, most notably Mitchell and Brunson-Hadley's *Ancient Burial Practices in the American Southwest. Archaeology, Physical Anthropology and Native American Perspectives* (2001). Its geographical scope encompasses a region that stretches from the Southwestern United States (Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico) down to Mexico's northernmost states (Sonora, Chihuahua). After a general introduction by Rakita and colleagues, it is essentially divided into two regionally-based main parts. The first part is dedicated to mortuary practices in the Puebloan



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case studies, detailed tables, and graphs.

2. After recalling the inception of the project, the introductory chapter 1 by Rakita and colleagues stresses the importance of establishing data recording standards and reinforcing data availability, notably thanks to the tDAR initiative. This intent is clearly what sets the volume apart. Indeed, such emphasis may come as a surprise to readers that are unfamiliar with the region and its problematics. However, it should be reminded that archaeothanatology and its thorough recording standards (formalized at the end of the 1980's and broadly adopted in France during the 1990's) are not commonplace yet in the Southwest. Furthermore, archaeology and physical anthropology in the region are met with endemic challenges. NAGPRA, built on good intent, nevertheless limits drastically the excavation of mortuary contexts. Future researchers may have to work with very small samples—or none at all—and references from past decades, oftentimes incomplete. Thus, the attempt to gather and synthesize as many data as possible in a single, readily accessible archive is highly commendable. Links to the database are provided and worth checking, even if a few lines about how it was structured and how to use it would have been useful.

3. Mulhern and Charles (chapter 2) discuss mortuary practices of the Durango Basketmakers using data from various sources: reanalysis of ancient collections, archives, field notes and reports. Standard Basketmaker

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record though; in fact, it appears that variations in mortuary patterns are more related to cultural differences between Basketmaker groups than intra-group hierarchy. Data also reveal that residential burial was not unusual (even if most burial sites were located outside of the settlements) and linked to immature and female individuals. Such practices raise interesting interrogations about the interactions between the living and their dead forebears and the construction of collective memory.

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4. Stodder's outstanding study (chapter 3) focuses on Pueblo I residential burials and places itself in continuity with the Basketmaker case. She demonstrates very convincingly that, even if the majority of Puebloan burials are found in middens, deposition of the dead directly on the floor of abandoned and intentionally collapsed houses is far more common than archaeologists previously thought, and may hold various meanings. Indeed, this practice exhibits a great deal of variability in terms of position, orientation, and care of the body—the only constant is that the observed practices are clearly intentional. Stodder also notes that while females are more numerous than males and children in such contexts (which may be due to matrilocality), the latter are not excluded altogether. In the face of such variations, which may be due the period's high dynamism, the author raises the question of whether one can consider a set of practices to be “normative” as opposed to “anomalous”. It is an important matter for archaeothanatologists, for it



archaeologists are confronted with at some point in their careers: fragmentary data and incomplete reports. The description of how the author chose to select, document and code heterogeneous data is of particular interest, especially since such questions are not Southwest-specific. Synthesis of the data do not appear to yield any consistency nor pattern beyond some already well-known practices like burials in middens. However, samples are few and far between, and this chapter's most important call is certainly the urgent need for additional data and improved recording.

6. Whitley (chapter 5) focuses on mortuary patterns in southern Colorado and in New Mexico. Her study highlights the added value of fine-grained spatial analysis for understanding complex relationships between the living and the dead, identifying foreign ideologies, and discuss their evolution diachronically. The author organized field notes and reports in a mortuary database whose categories (vertical and horizontal location, burial covering, biological data...) are detailed in a dedicated section that should prove inspiring to any reader interested in similar problematics. Her results suggest that burial location and covering are the most significant parameters when it comes to determine to what degree funerary contexts were separated from the living. Various shifts in burial practices throughout the region's history may be correlated to the migration of well-organized groups who, possessing strong cultural identities, were





ensure that such studies are made possible in the future.

7. Watson's chapter (chapter 6) opens up the second part of the volume, dedicated to the Southern Deserts. His work focuses on mortuary practices in the immensity of the Sonoran Desert during the Early Agricultural Period (or EAP, 2100 BC-AD 50), an era when permanent settlements appear alongside the first agricultural investment. Such time periods are always interesting to archaeothanatologists, because transitioning from nomadic/semi-nomadic lifestyles to sedentary settlements usually involve important changes in mortuary practices. The study is based upon the statistical analysis of 427 mortuary contexts distributed over 12 sites, for a grand total of 470 individuals. It is important to underline that such a sample, although quite impressive, remains limited in comparison to the duration of the EAP and the immensity of the area. The author is fully aware of this limit, and the study in general retains its high scientific value. Its results suggest that, notwithstanding considerable intra- and inter-site variability, dominant tendencies and norms do exist during the EAP and evolve through time. Mortuary practices are first dominated by individual, flexed primary inhumation, with no grave goods. A few exceptions, like multiple and/or secondary burials, are documented too. One of the most interesting results is certainly the steady increase of cremation over the course of various phases, until it becomes the norm during the Hohokam period.

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Wash, the latter contributing to a vast majority of the sample (around 80%). It appears that, as mentioned before, cremation was Hohokam populations favoured practice. It was not reserved to specific segments of the population: individuals of each sex, age or social rank appear in the sample. Even more interestingly, it seems that cremation rituals were multi-staged, involving a series of steps that ended in secondary deposits of cremated remains. The status of these remains, half mortuary and half inalienable heirlooms, would certainly deserve a chapter of its own in the future.

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9. Livesay and Gilman's chapter 8 brings us closer to Mesoamerica, not only geographically but also in terms of mortuary practices. Their study is anchored in southwestern New Mexico, in the Mimbres area. Burials in this region share fascinating commonalities with Mesoamerican ones, notably those found in the ancient Maya world: intramural burials in residential sectors, ritually "killed" ceramics covering the head, presence of the Hero Twins in the iconography, etc. This chapter focuses more particularly on the numbers of ceramics in the grave, their disposition around the dead, and the evolution of these parameters through time. Livesay and Gilman demonstrate convincingly that, over the course of approximately three hundred centuries, the numbers of ceramics per burial decrease while vessels are increasingly deposited over the head, until it becomes the dominant norm. The authors interpret this phenomenon



The results are presented diachronically. During the Viejo period (AD 600-1200), Rakita notes that most burials are individual, with the body flexed on one side, located in public plazas. On the other hand, during the Medio period (AD 1200-1475), mortuary practices grow a lot more diverse, perhaps (as underlined by Livesay and Gilman) under Mesoamerican influence. The burials move to more private spaces, inside rooms that were sometimes abandoned. Sacrificial practices increase slightly, multiple deposits become more frequent, and seated bodies or individuals with frogged-out legs appear. Finally, during the Españoles period (AD 1660-1821), Christian burials become the norm. In his conclusion, the author addresses various issues and biases that affect his sample and puts them into perspective. This step back, absolutely necessary, is not always taken in mortuary studies. Thus, Rakita's chapter is worth reading not only for the data it provides, but also for the way the author handles them.

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11. Watson's chapter 10 summarizes all the others and attempts to provide the reader with an overview of mortuary practices in the Southwest—a considerable undertaking. To this end, the author collated databases from the other contributors and performed preliminary quantitative studies. Single primary inhumation appears to be the norm throughout the Southwest. The major exception to this dominant practice is cremation, preferred in the Hohokam area. Flexed positions remain



into the details of each contribution, she proposes a more general discussion and revisits some observations she made in 2001. At the time, one of her main concerns was the apparent focus on social status and rank that left many other aspects aside. The current volume avoids such pitfalls, but it is met with other challenges that stem from its particular focus. Most of them are not Southwest-specific problems: data completeness, reliability, biased samples. About the latter, the author notes that it may not be sufficiently addressed in the different contributions. Goldstein also took great interest into the volume's efforts to enhance data recording standards. The few paragraphs that deal with this issue are outstanding and address fundamental problems, notably the persistent issue of separating osteological and archaeological records. Her mentioning Jean-Claude Gardin as a reference comes as a welcome surprise, for his seminal works about data management (long before the advent of computers) clearly deserve to be more widespread. After briefly summarizing the various contributions, she concludes this excellent epilogue with a series of leads that should certainly warrant further investigation.

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13. In sum, *Ancient Southwestern Mortuary Practices* is a compilation that was prepared with the future of research in mind. It is equal parts synthesis and methodology, conclusions and openings, with the tDAR database bringing the editors' and authors' project full circle. With a grand total of approximately 4100 burial contexts



mind, this last point is essential in such a broad study, especially in a region that displays such mortuary variability. A more personal regret is the scarcity of visual material. There are very few drawings and no photograph at all, which may be due to legal restrictions rather than to the authors' will. If that is the case, then it is quite detrimental. It is always regrettable for a book dedicated to mortuary practices not to present at least one representation for each case study, especially since preservation in the Southwest is known to be excellent. This minor flaw aside, *Ancient Southwestern...* will undoubtedly become a reference and an asset for students and researchers alike in years to come thanks to the sheer amount of data it provides. It is clearly a huge step forward for mortuary archaeology in the Southwest, and one can only hope that the time and effort the authors put into their project will inspire others to tread similar paths.

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