

The Material Remnants of Domestic Life

The plan of the structure that we excavated at the Ejutla site conforms with that of other prehispanic Classic period Oaxacan residences. The small patio with a subfloor tomb under one of the rooms is a typical pattern for prehispanic houses in the Valley of Oaxaca at that time (e.g., Feinman et al. 2002a, 2006; Winter 1974, 1995). The simple burial of an individual in a small pit below a midden area near the house also is indicative of a residential context, as are the shallow firepit and probable cooking area in the northwest corner of the structure and the food remains and other residential trash in the middens and work areas that are proximate to the house (e.g., Feinman et al. 2002a, 2006). The mix of craft debris with domestic trash in the middens and the artifacts and raw materials in the house tie its residents to multiple craft activities (shell craftworking, ceramic production, lapidary). The craft activities and firing pits are discussed in chapters 7, 8, and 9. Here we describe the artifact assemblages and other material evidence that confirms the domestic nature of the excavated complex: the contents of the tomb, the simple burial, key characteristics of the ceramic and stone assemblages, subsistence remains, and workspaces inside the house, including the probable kitchen area. Surface remains in the fields south of the excavated area indicate the presence of at least one other similar residence in what appears to have been a barrio of craftworkers at the eastern edge of the Ejutla site.

5.1. The Subfloor Tomb and Its Contents

As we began to expose and excavate the remains inside the small, subfloor tomb (Figure 5.1, see Figure 4.14, Figure 4.15, Figure 4.16), it was immediately apparent that the tomb assemblage was complex, including more than a single individual. At least four people were interred in the tomb—four crania were present (Figure 5.2, Figure 5.3). Two of the bodies were almost entirely in proper anatomical position (Figure 5.4), while the other two individuals and a dog were disarticulated and jumbled in a pile at the head (north end) of the tomb. At this point, we suspected the mortuary assemblage was the result of ongoing reuse of the tomb and not secondary burial (Middleton et al. 1996, 1998). Thus, before removal, all bones were identified and labeled, and their exact provenience was recorded in detailed drawings of the tomb assemblage that were prepared in the field.

The entire mortuary assemblage was analyzed in the field laboratory by William D. Middleton, a member of our crew, who made preliminary sex and age assessments and inventoried and catalogued all disarticulated remains.

During the summer following the tomb excavation (1994), the entire assemblage was reexamined with the aid of Guillermo Molina Villegas, a physical anthropologist from the Centro INAH Oaxaca, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, to confirm and refine all original assessments. Age estimates were based on a combination of pubic symphysis and auricular surface of the ilium (Krogman and Iscan 1986; Lovejoy et al. 1985; Meindl et al. 1985), while sex was based on a combination of cranial and pelvic indices (Krogman and Iscan 1986; White and Folkens 1991). Some relatively minor indications of dietary stress were noted on the skeletal material from the tomb (Middleton et al. 1996).

During the excavation of the tomb assemblage, we labeled the four human crania in the order that they were uncovered (1–4). The skulls of the first individuals interred had been rearranged during later interments, so the skull numbers do not correspond to the order in which the postcranial remains were exposed. The uppermost body is numbered as Individual 3, a gracile male approximately 29–30 years of age who was positioned on top of Individual 2. Individual 3's body was sprawled, with both legs flexed and resting on the sides of the tomb, and his neck and cranium were rotated upward toward the west side of the tomb (Figure 5.5). Collapse of the roof had slightly disarranged the right half of his pelvis. His only malady was dental caries.

Individual 2 was a robust female approximately 30–34 years of age; her body was extended on the floor of the tomb, and most skeletal elements were in their proper anatomical position (Figure 5.6). Only the pelvis, abdominal area, and left fibula were slightly disturbed. She had periostitis on her right humerus and femur as well as arthritis in both hands and feet and vertebrae. Individual 2 had several dental caries and abscesses. Individual 1 was a very robust male of approximately 35–40 years of age, whose postcranial remains were completely disarticulated in the pile of bones at the head of the tomb (Figure 5.7). Most of the individual's skeletal elements were present, and we were able to identify them as belonging to this individual on the basis of their size and robusticity. Individual 1 had periostitis on his left fibula and arthritis in his feet. His mandibular molars showed extensive wear. Individual 4 was a child of approximately 5 years of age. The child's remains were very fragmentary (cranium and long bones) and mixed in with those of Individual 1 in the pile of bones at the head of the tomb.

The sequence of interment in the tomb was decipherable. Individuals 1 and 4 were the first to be placed in the



Figure 5.1. The subfloor tomb at Ejutla, including a large stone from the collapsed roof and ceramic offerings.

tomb, along with the dog. Their soft tissue had decayed completely by the time Individual 2 was buried, at which time their remains were pushed to the head of the tomb to make room for the new interment, and the cranium of Individual 1 was carefully placed on top of the pile of disarticulated bones. The remains of Individuals 1 and 4 were so jumbled that it was not possible to determine which body was interred first, but most likely the adult was the first occupant or they were entombed together. The final burial was Individual 3. Given the minimal disturbance of Individual 2 and the awkward position of Individual 3, it would appear that a shorter time elapsed between the two final burials and that Individual 2 had not decomposed sufficiently for its remains to be pushed toward the head of the tomb when it was reopened for the final burial. Nevertheless, the decomposition of Individual 2's remains was sufficiently advanced that the interment of Individual 3 caused some disturbance, especially to the chest and abdominal area of Individual 2.

Once the loose teeth and smaller bones (carpals, tarsals, phalanges) from the jumbled bones at the head of the tomb had been identified, sorted, and added to those recovered in situ, it was apparent that there were several redundant

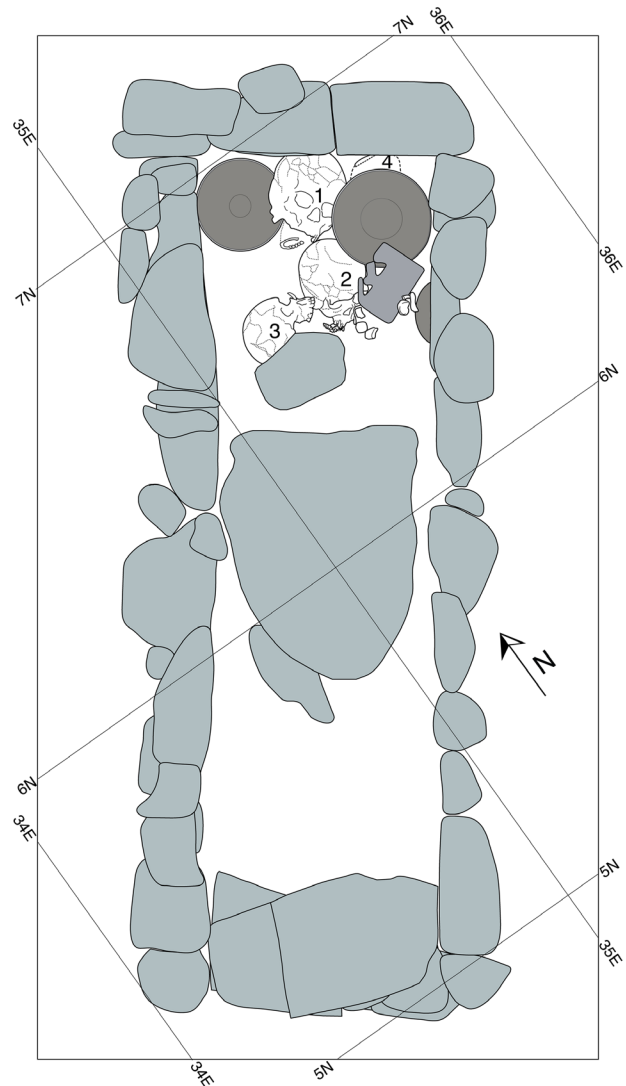


Figure 5.2. Drawing of tomb contents, showing four crania and four ceramic offerings.

elements that did not belong to any of the identified individuals, that is, the total number of elements exceeded a minimum number of four individuals. These redundancies, including a left lower third premolar, a left lower first molar, a right second metacarpal, a left fifth metatarsal, and a left cuboid, all of adult size, indicate that at least one additional adult was interred in the tomb (Middleton et al. 1996, 1998). None of the disarticulated bones in the tomb were modified in a manner to support secondary use or interment, and we suspect these redundant elements are the sole remnants of the primary burial of one or more individuals whose remains were largely removed prior to the placement of Individuals 1 and 4 in the tomb. It seems likely that when the bones of the first tomb occupant were moved, these small elements remained, perhaps buried in the earthen floor of the tomb. The few small bones from an earlier interment do not reflect a typical secondary burial assemblage, and so we suspect that they were small fragments of a skeletal assemblage that was left behind in the tomb. The condition and completeness of the remains of



Figure 5.3. Ceramic offerings, including a small effigy vessel, and multiple human crania in the subfloor tomb.



Figure 5.4. The last two interments in the tomb.

Individual 1 also indicate that, although he was completely disarticulated, he was in his primary burial place.

The skeletal remains from the individual (or individuals) that preceded Individuals 1 and 4 in the tomb were most likely discarded near the dwelling. In extramural midden contexts near the excavated house, we recovered more than 100 human teeth, bones, and bone fragments representing virtually all adult skeletal elements. Together with the redundant elements in the tomb, a conservative estimate is that they pertain to one or two individuals. Consequently, at least five individuals were buried in the tomb in a more or less serial fashion, with the skeletal remains of earlier burials pushed aside to make room for the newly deceased (Middleton et al. 1996, 1998). Awareness of ongoing tomb use and reuse was not widespread at the time of our excavations. Disturbed or disarticulated primary burials in tombs often were identified as secondary burials (e.g., Romano 1974, 96). Yet ongoing tomb use had been recognized in several instances in Oaxaca (Acosta and Romero 1992; Flannery 1983a; Lind and Urcid 1983; Paddock et al. 1968) and the Oaxaca barrio in Teotihuacan (Sempowski and Spence 1994, 133–34). Middleton et al. (1996, 1998) proposed ongoing tomb use to explain the distribution

of skeletal remains in Tomb 7 at Monte Albán (see also Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017), and we subsequently documented the serial reuse of four Classic period tombs that we excavated at El Palmillo (Feinman and Nicholas 2009; Feinman et al. 2006).

Intermixed in the pile of bones at the head of the tomb were the largely complete remains of a small adult dog (Figure 5.8). In prehispanic Oaxaca, dogs were common offerings in human burials, from simple graves to elaborate tombs (Duncan et al. 2008; Feinman et al. 2008, 180; Flannery 1983b; Lapham et al. 2013, 2023; Lind and Urcid 2010, 222; Winter et al. 1995, 37, 51; Zárate Morán 1992). These offerings reflect the widespread Mesoamerican belief that dogs guided the dead across the river that led to the Underworld (e.g., Sahagún 1952, 41–42; Starr 1900, 27).

The offerings in the tomb were modest. In addition to the dog, a small effigy vessel and four undecorated ceramic bowls were placed at the head of the tomb in association with the four crania (see Figure 5.2, Figure 5.3, Appendix 2). Even though the occupants of this house crafted shell ornaments, only one small shell bead (*Chama* sp., <0.5 cm diameter) was placed in the tomb, next to the pelvis of Individual 2 (see Figure 5.6). The ceramic effigy vessel



Figure 5.5. Drawing of the flexed body of Individual 3 and a broken ceramic bowl below his shoulder.

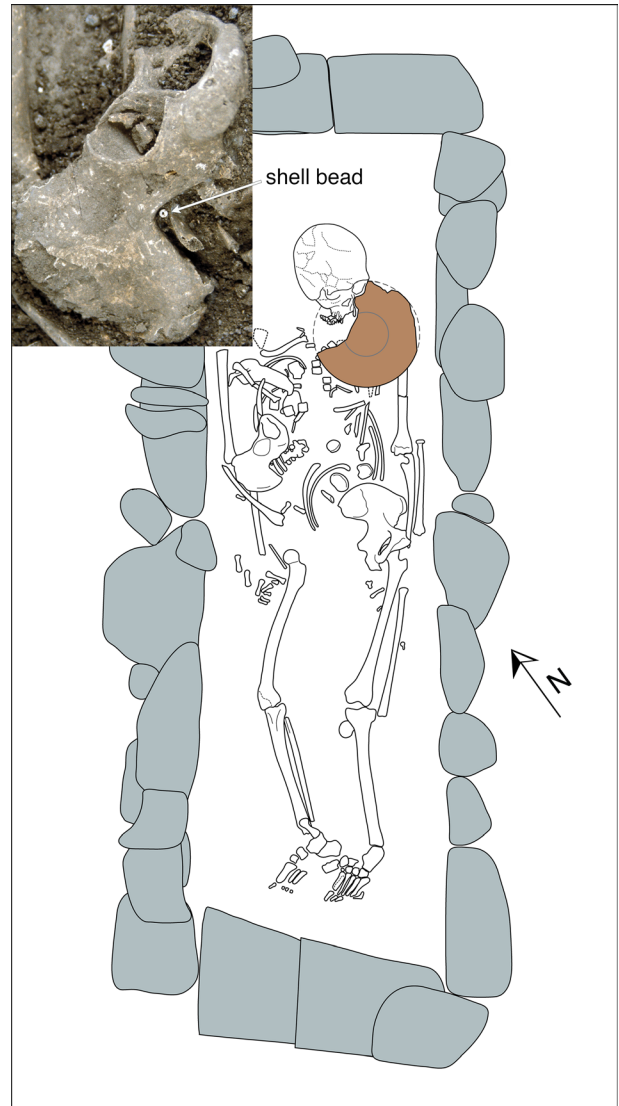


Figure 5.6. Drawing of Individual 2 with a broken ceramic bowl above her left shoulder: a small shell bead next to the pelvis is visible in the inset photo.

is fairly typical, if small. This grayware Classic period funerary vessel portrays a seated individual wearing a mask of Cocijo (Figure 5.9), the Zapotec supernatural associated with lightning (e.g., Marcus 1983a; Marcus and Flannery 1996, 159). Although the effigy vessel is smaller and less elaborately adorned than many Classic period funerary urns in the Valley of Oaxaca, it presents many key characteristics of Zapotec funerary vessels (e.g., Bernal 1947–48; Caso and Bernal 1952; Paddock 1966; Paddock et al. 1968; Saville 1904). The individual sits with crossed legs, hands on its knees, and wears a short cape over an undecorated loincloth. The headdress of the figure is adorned with a large glyph C applique, and the individual is bejeweled with bracelets on both arms, large earspools, and a necklace of large beads. As with many Zapotec funerary vessels, a hollow cylinder forms the back of the effigy object.

Three of the other vessels were complete. Like the effigy vessel, they all were made in gris paste and, although undecorated, have burnished black surfaces (see Appendix 2). The vessel under the effigy was a large shallow bowl or plate with a rim diameter of 24 cm (Figure 5.10 top). In the corner of the tomb, partially positioned under the crania of Individual 1, was an outleaned-wall bowl with a rounded bottom and rim diameter of 22 cm (Figure 5.10 bottom). The third vessel, a shallow outleaned-wall bowl, was placed against the tomb wall near the effigy vessel. It is smaller than the other two, with a rim diameter of 15 cm (Figure 5.10 center). The three gris bowls are typical of vessel forms found in a range of Classic period contexts in the Valley of Oaxaca, including offerings, burials, and other domestic contexts. In contrast to the effigy and other complete vessels, the fourth ceramic object was partial and so poorly preserved that it could not be reconstructed (see

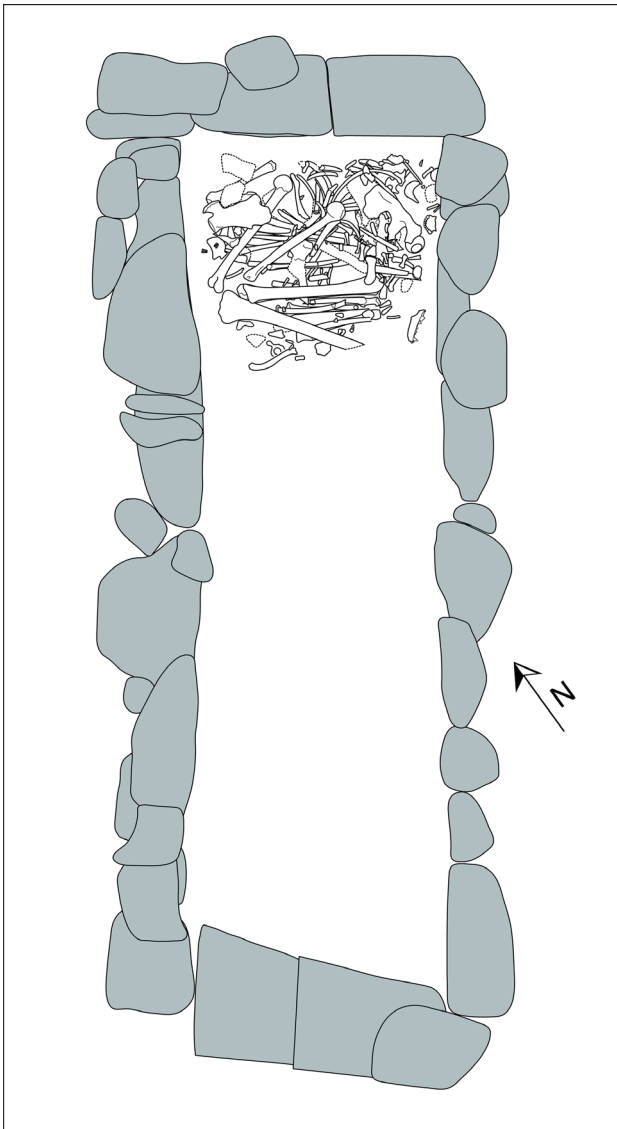


Figure 5.7. Drawing of the bones of Individual 1 and Individual 4 jumbled together at the head of the tomb.

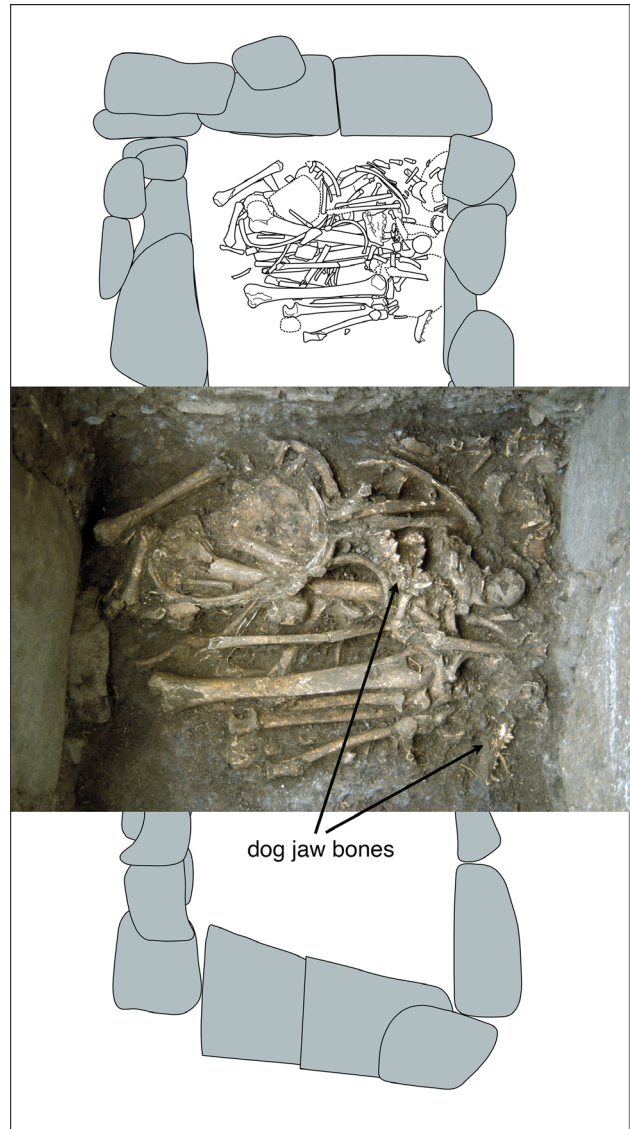


Figure 5.8. Piled bones of Individuals 1 and 4 and a small dog (jaw bones labeled) at the head of the tomb.

Figure 5.6). We found similar poorly preserved vessels made of a soft, low-fired café paste in a subfloor tomb at El Palmillo (Feinman and Nicholas 2008, 34), as did Paddock (Paddock et al. 1968) in tomb contexts at Lambityeco, in the eastern arm of the Valley of Oaxaca. Such low-fired café paste vessels are rare and largely restricted to burial contexts. Given their fragility, they appear to have been made specifically for that purpose.

Given the placement of the offerings, we suspect that they were positioned in the tomb after the last interment. But since the tomb was entered multiple times, it is not possible to tie specific grave offerings to particular individuals. Yet at least two of the vessels were likely in the tomb prior to the last interment. The skull of Individual 1, which was disturbed by the burial of Individual 2, was positioned above the outleaned-wall bowl (22 cm rim diameter) in

the corner, and the partial café bowl was placed above the left shoulder of Individual 2 and below the last interment (Individual 3). The dog remains were mixed with the bones of the first two burials (Individuals 1 and 4) piled at the head of tomb. Its final positioning there indicates that it likely accompanied an early interment.

The modesty of the funerary offerings in the tomb aligns with our earlier assessment that this household was not of especially high status. And yet, based on the presence of the tomb, along with the relative size of the house and mode of construction (foundation of finished and roughly finished stones rather than rough cobbles), neither were the residents of this household at the base of the socioeconomic hierarchy (see chapter 4). The relative health of the individuals interred in the tomb accords with this assessment.



Figure 5.9. Small effigy vessel with Cocijo imagery from the tomb.

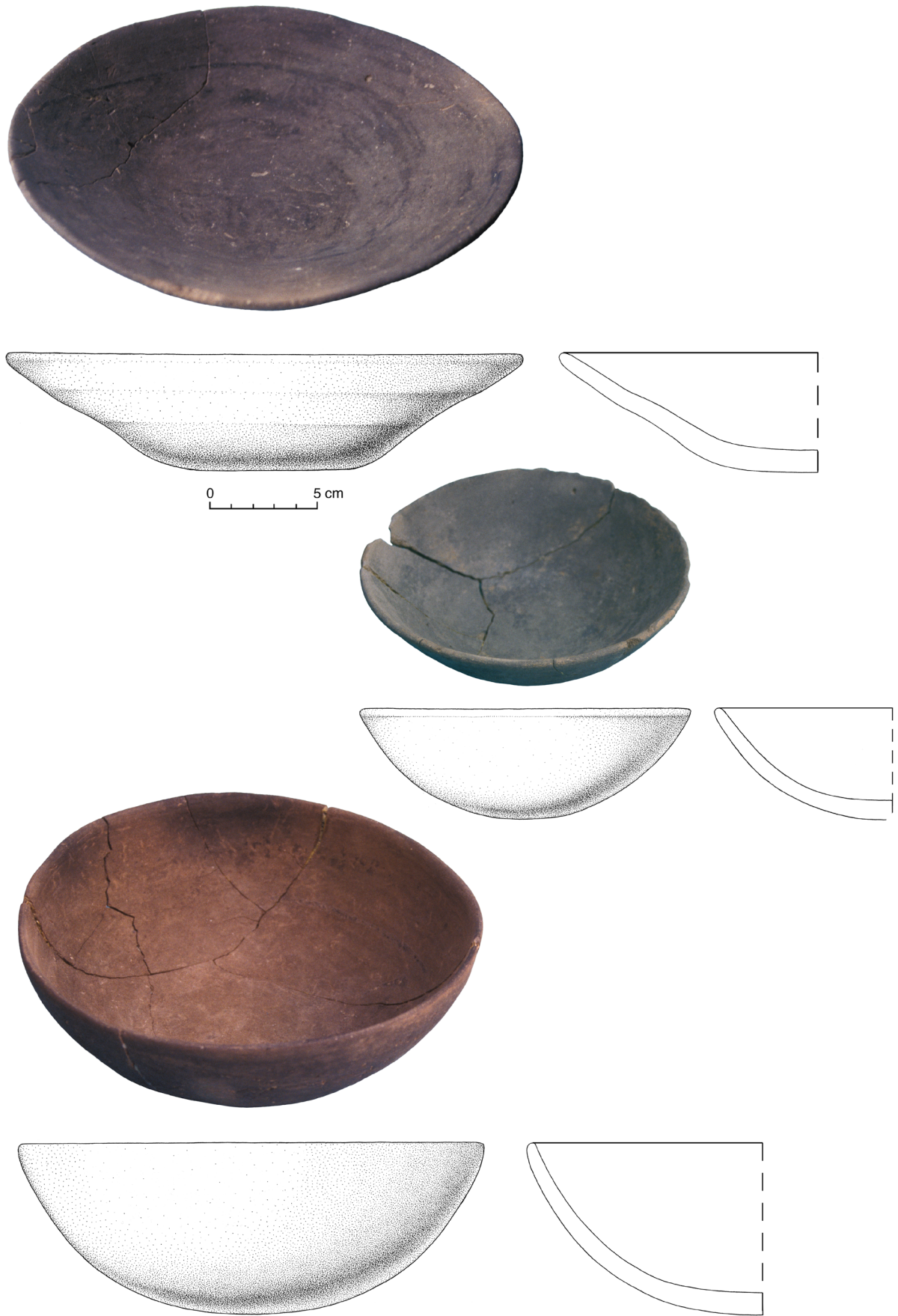


Figure 5.10. Three complete ceramic vessels from the tomb, all in gris paste: large shallow bowl or plate (top); small shallow outleaned-wall bowl (center), and outleaned-wall bowl (bottom).

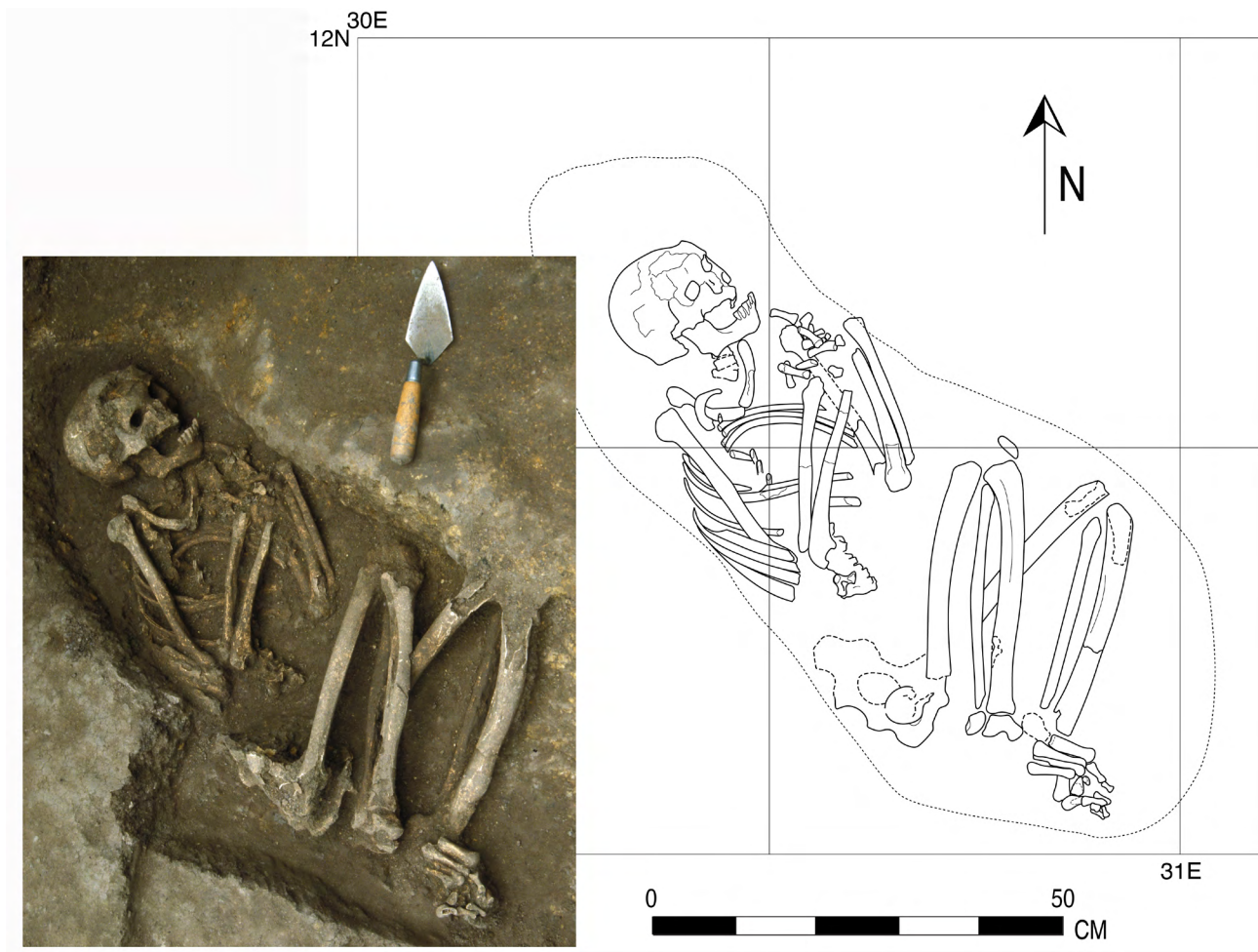


Figure 5.11. Simple pit burial (Feature 3) of an adult female under midden north of the structure.

5.2. Feature 3 Burial

The individual interred in the pit grave was an adult female laid on her left side with her knees flexed (Figure 5.11). The skeletal remains were largely complete, and the skull was well enough preserved to see that the individual had undergone oblique tabular cranial deformation. Several maladies include an infection (likely osteomyelitis) on the left tibia, an infection in the nasal cavity, and heavy wear and caries on several molars. Scars on the mandible show healing from prior trauma. As there were no grave offerings with the body, this individual may have been afforded lesser personal standing or status than the individuals interred in the tomb.

5.3. The Domestic Assemblage at Ejutla

5.3.1. Ceramics

The large midden north of the structure contained more than cut shell debris. It also was filled with residential trash including huge amounts of broken utilitarian pottery, stone tools and chipping debris, and animal bones. Domestic trash also was abundant in fill contexts under the structure, in exterior areas around the house, and in all

the pit kilns. After the kilns served as firing features, refuse was deposited in them.

By quantity and volume, ceramic remains are the most abundant material that we collected during the excavations. These remains are heavily dominated by gris (gray) and café (brown) plainware vessels that are typical of the Classic period (ca. 250–900 CE) in the Valley of Oaxaca (e.g., Caso et al. 1967; Feinman 2018; Kowalewski et al. 1978). Overall, the Ejutla assemblage is generically similar to the Classic period contexts at the three sites—El Palmillo, Lambityeco, and the Mitla Fortress—we later excavated in the eastern arm of the valley (Feinman and Nicholas 2009, 2011b, 2016b). These two paste categories comprise approximately 95% of the utilitarian pottery at Ejutla, with roughly twice as much grayware as café. The proportions vary slightly between the later occupation (associated with the structure) and the earlier one below the house: ~37% café in the lower levels and ~32% in the later levels (Table 5.1). This decline is similar to changes over time in the ceramic assemblages at El Palmillo and the Mitla Fortress (Feinman and Nicholas 2009, table 4b, 2011b, table 5a); across the entire Valley of Oaxaca, gris paste vessels increased slightly as a proportion of all ceramic wares during the Classic period (Feinman 2018).