

Bioarchaeology and Social Theory

*Series Editor:* Debra L. Martin

Roselyn A. Campbell

Anna J. Osterholtz *Editors*

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# The Poetics of Violence in Afroeurasian Bioarchaeology

 Springer

# Bioarchaeology and Social Theory

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*Bioarchaeology and Social Theory* aims to publish research grounded in empirical and scientific analysis of human skeletonized remains (referred to as bioarchaeology) from a wide variety of ancient, historic and contemporary contexts. The interpretations utilize social theory to frame the questions that blend cultural, environmental and social domains so that an integrated picture emerges. In this series, scholars have moved bioarchaeology into new methodological and theoretical areas.

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Roselyn A. Campbell • Anna J. Osterholtz  
Editors

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*Rose: For my dad*  
*Anna: For Joe*

# Foreword

As anthropologists working in the area of violence, it is challenging on many levels. There are ethical and methodological issues in using human skeletal remains to reconstruct violent events and violent behaviors enacted in periods as remote from today as the early Neolithic. There are responsibilities to any living descendants. Studying violence in past populations necessitates a careful approach that is respectful and that does not sensationalize or romanticize the findings. This collection of papers attends to all of the ethical, methodological, and interpretational issues raised, and offers an exceedingly fine-grained and multi-scalar approach to thinking about violence in the past. And, focus on the Eastern Hemisphere makes these studies all the more valuable because of the uniqueness of regions and time periods covered.

These chapters all use theory to expand our understanding of social life and human behavior at multiple levels. Authors were directed to interpret violence from various assemblages, some with great time depth, using Neil Whitehead's poetics approach. This focus proved very productive, and authors considered how violence fit into the larger arena of ideology, symbolism, ritual, ceremony, group identity, status, and hierarchy. One question addressed in many of the chapters relates to what meaning violence had for the perpetrators, victims, and witnesses. Multiple lines of evidence are used in these studies, including skeletal markers of trauma and stress, geochemical analyses, ethnohistoric sources, historical archives, and detailed reconstruction of the archaeological and mortuary contexts.

Engagement with theory in each of these chapters has meant that the authors have approached the cultural meanings, values, intentions, beliefs, and ideas of groups through the lens of available mortuary practices and information on demography and pathology. A roadmap is provided for how to use the poetics of violence as a framing device that invites interpretations into new areas. For example, Chapter "[Performative Violence and Power: Human Sacrifice as a Mechanism to Establish Group Identity and Social Organization in Early Bronze Age China](#)" examines the role of human sacrifice during the Early Bronze Age for the Qijia culture in China. The poetics of human sacrifice for this culture appears to stem from social processes and ritual practices that helped with forming solidarity, negotiating

social status between lineages, and enforcing social norms. Likewise, Chapter “[Trade and Trauma Along the Silk Road, the Evidence from the Western Frontier of China and Mongolia \(700 BC–420 AD\)](#)” investigates the poetics of violence along the Silk Road during the second century BCE on the western frontier of modern-day China and Mongolia. Socially sanctioned training programs were responsible for violence and mutilation. The public display of violence provided important cultural values to the broader community.

The volume as a whole makes a strong case for utilizing the poetics of violence theory because each chapter was able to customize and adapt the overall framework of poetics to each case study. Several of the chapters demonstrate that the poetics approach is a good addition or complement to other social theories about violence as well.

Bioarchaeological data without theory has limited explanatory power, and it is difficult to generalize about meaning beyond a local context. In these studies, methodology, social theory, and data are tightly bound supplying the reader with a scientifically sound approach that is fortified by using multiple lines of evidence to explain the role of violence in people’s lives in the past. Theory in these chapters has aided in making sense of the data in a broader context. These studies attest to the value of carefully collected empirical observations and robust data sets as the baseline for building interpretations that are enhanced with the use of social theory.

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# Acknowledgments

**Rose** First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to my co-editor, Anna. Her support, encouragement, and generosity are in large part why this volume has come to fruition, and have played no small role in my own development as a scholar as well. The contributors to this volume have been a great pleasure to work with, providing fascinating new insights at every turn, and bearing with me as I navigated so much in life. I am also grateful to Kara Cooney, Sara Becker, and Don Ryan, who have supported me, championed me, and pushed me to be a better scholar. To my long-suffering mother, sister, and wonderful friends, I am forever grateful for your patience and unwavering support, and for still engaging in the not-very-uplifting conversational topic of violence. For my dad, who left this earth too early: I am who I am because of you. I miss you every day.

**Anna** This volume started as a pre-Covid conversation between Rose and myself. Through a global pandemic (everyone), her finishing a PhD, the tumult of the job market (Rose), and the tenure process (me), this volume has been a labor of love. It has been a delight to work with Rose on this, I look forward to more collaboration and camaraderie in the future. I am also incredibly grateful to the chapter authors for their thoughtful approach to the topic, their nuanced understanding and portrayal of violent interaction, and their commitment to completing this given the personal and professional struggles we've all had between 2019 and 2023. You've all been troopers, and I look forward to working with you again soon. To Joe and the rest of my family, who hear more about violence than they bargained for, thank you for your unquestioning support.

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**Roselyn A. Campbell** received her PhD from the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA. She has conducted archaeological and bioarchaeological fieldwork in Egypt, Jordan, Peru, Spain, Ethiopia, the U.K., and the western United States. Her research encompasses anthropological approaches to violence and trauma in the past, the history and evolution of cancer in hominin remains, Egyptian archaeology and funerary practices, health and disease in the past, and portrayals of archaeology in popular culture. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in Biological Anthropology at the University of California, Riverside, as well as the Assistant Director of the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy and the co-founder and Executive Director of the Paleo-oncology Research Organization.

**Anna J. Osterholtz** received her PhD from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She has excavated and analyzed skeletal remains from Europe (Croatia, Romania, and Cyprus), the Near East (the UAE, Jordan, and Israel), and the Americas (Mexico, Belize, and the US), focusing on the social role of violent performance and mortuary processing in identity formation and negotiation. She is also a specialist in the analysis of commingled and fragmentary bone assemblages. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Biological Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology and Middle Eastern Cultures at Mississippi State University.

# Introduction



Anna J. Osterholtz and Roselyn A. Campbell

**Abstract** The poetics model was developed from Whitehead's work in Amazonia and has been applied extensively to case studies within the Americas (Western Hemisphere). For this volume, we wanted to see how well this approach could be applied to case studies in the Eastern Hemisphere. The geographic region covered in this volume (Afroeurasia), sometimes called the Old World in a remnant of colonial scholarship, presents unique challenges and opportunities for poetics theory. We asked researchers to examine archaeological assemblages including burials through the lens of poetics, and the results show the power of this theoretical approach within bioarchaeology. The chapters in this volume illustrate, by case studies from the Eastern Hemisphere, the power of the poetics model to examine the confluence of violence and identity, both through interpersonal and structural violence lenses. Violence has an important part to play in the formation of groups, the negotiation of social relationships, marriage patterns, and social hierarchy, just to name a few important elements.

**Keywords** Poetics · Old World · Colonialism · Social structure · Identity formation · Group cohesion · Violence · Sacrifice

This volume comes out of a session co-organized by the editors at the 2018 American Association of Physical Anthropology meetings in Austin, Texas. For this session, we asked the contributors to examine assemblages from throughout the

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Eastern Hemisphere (Europe, Asia, and Africa) through the lens of the poetics of violence as described by Whitehead. This model was developed with his work in Amazonia and has been applied extensively to case studies within the Americas (Western Hemisphere), and we wanted to see how well this approach could be applied to case studies in the Eastern Hemisphere. Would a theory developed while studying an Indigenous group in Amazonia be applicable or provide a new way to interpret lived experience in other times and places?

The geographic region covered in this volume (Afroeurasia), sometimes called the Old World in a remnant of colonial scholarship, presents unique challenges and opportunities for poetics theory. The time depth is enormous, with case studies within this volume extending back over 5000 years into the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. In Europe and Asia, the study of the past has been primarily carried out by the descendants of the groups who created the sites they study, but in other regions, centuries of colonialism have left their mark on the way research has been conducted and published, and even in what types of evidence have been preserved. The history of colonialism baked into archaeology in the Western Hemisphere, Africa, and Southwest Asia is not as prominent for the study of Croatian or British archaeological sites, though other biases have also shaped the way we view the deep history of these regions. How have colonialism and biases toward Classical societies (e.g. the Roman conquest) impacted the development of theory in the study of violence in these regions? And how might applying a poetic lens to the bioarchaeological studies of these regions yield new insight into attitudes towards violence in these cultures?

We asked researchers to examine archaeological assemblages including burials through the lens of poetics, and the results show the power of this theoretical approach within bioarchaeology. The focus on context forces us to consider lived experience from multiple perspectives other than just the analysis of skeletal lesions, from archaeological context to the evaluation of historical text and ethnographic analogy and in some cases chemical testing. These lines of evidence create an intricate web in which the individual can be situated and will experience violent interaction in different ways than any other individual.

For Whitehead, violence was integral to understanding identity and hierarchy. Whitehead looks at violence as intrinsic to how identity is formed, arguing that violence cannot “be entirely understood by reference to biological functions, sociological functions, or material and ecological necessities but has to be appreciated for the way in which it is also a cultural expression of the most fundamental and complex kind” (Whitehead, 2004, 68). Placing violence as a central element of individual and group identity formation means that we must “entertain the possibility that violence is often more necessary to effective cultural performance than we may care to admit, either in our own case or in that of others” (2004, 68).

Whitehead was a social anthropologist, examining living groups to understand relationships between living peoples. In order to apply social theory such as poetics to the past, material culture traces of these relationships must be identifiable and interpretable. In particular, how do we interpret performance in the past? How do we identify ritual? In previous applications of poetics to bioarchaeological approaches,

Osterholtz has inferred the presence of ritual and performance through the standardization of body processing (Osterholtz, 2018a, b). The body is manipulable, and can serve as material for the creation and presentation of social messages through violent interaction. The body becomes, in such cases, a material for social messaging, the syntax and grammar for social communication.

For the initial session and this volume, we asked contributors to look at violence as a form of social communication that leaves behind significant material culture traces (such as traumatic lesions or atypical burial). According to the poetics model, violence is integral to the formation, negotiation, and renegotiation of social order and social identities. So we can think of violence as both *con*-structive and *de*-structive, and *de*-generative and *re*-generative. Eric Haanstad, a student of Whitehead's, notes that violence has tremendous communicative power, and that violence produces meaning in itself while intensifying the force of underlying social messages discussed through violent discourse (Haanstad, 2020). In effect, poetics allows us to view violent performance as the synergistic result of both ritual and performance. A poetic lens allows us to think not about if or how much violence is present within a society, but to examine how violence is *used*, how gender, age, and other demographic factors change our exposure to different patterns of violence, and how these different exposures influence our social relationships with other groups within society.

This combination of ritual and performance suggests the importance of the actors involved. In bioarchaeological explorations of violence, the victims of violent interactions are the most easily identified. It is their bodies that we examine, their cranial depression fractures that we score and quantify. The presence of the aggressors is inferred through their victims. The third group, the witnesses, form a fuzzy and ill-defined group that nonetheless has tremendous significance. The witnesses, in their role of viewing violent interaction, have a shared experience with other witnesses. This helps to form bonds between them, as well as defining their positions and relationships between the victim and aggressor groups (Osterholtz, 2018a). Violence as social communication in this way seeks not to see violence as positive or negative, present or absent. Instead, it seeks to understand the social role that violence plays within the creation and negotiation of those social relationships, teaching the society at large what the rules are, where they fit in society, and what is expected of them. Violence in this way can help to define 'us' and 'them.' If we look at violence as social communication and as a generative process, violence becomes a part of lived experience. And since bioarchaeology is at its heart an effort to understand lived experience in the past (through reconstruction of lifeways, subsistence, health, and so on), violence must be viewed as an important structure within society (Whitehead, 2007). Viewing violence as a meaningful social structure also allows us to seek understanding, in a way that is impossible as long as violence is viewed as an aberration rather than a piece of a cultural puzzle.

The chapters in this volume illustrate by case studies from the Eastern Hemisphere the power of the poetics model to examine the confluence of violence and identity, both through interpersonal and structural violence lenses. Violence has an

important part to play in the formation of groups, the negotiation of social relationships, marriage patterns, and social hierarchy, just to name a few important elements.

The contributions within this volume span a wide range, both temporally and geographically. The volume is organized geographically, with sections on Asia, Africa, and Europe and Great Britain. Within these sections (except for Africa, which contains a single chapter), the chapters are then organized chronologically. While the case studies exemplify the applicability of the poetics model, they also highlight the use of multiple lines of evidence and the need for context. Those chapters dealing with historic periods, in particular, weave in historical texts for a richer understanding of the past. All also highlight archaeological context and note that robust interpretations are only possible if and when we look at multiple lines of evidence.

In the chapter “[Performative Violence and Power: Human Sacrifice as a Mechanism to Establish Group Identity and Social Organization in Early Bronze Age China](#)”, Dittmar and colleagues examine the role of human sacrifice as a mechanism of social control during the Early Bronze Age during for the Qijia culture (c. 3300—1900 BCE) in modern-day China. Human sacrifice, identified through multiple lines of evidence (archaeological and bioarchaeological) can be identified through burial location as well as the presence of perimortem, sharp-force trauma. The authors bring in additional lines of evidence in the form of analogy with later periods, and note that additional lines such as molecular methods may further elucidate whether sacrificed individuals came from the same communities as the individuals in whose tombs they were found or from groups in conflict with those individuals (i.e., war captives). The poetics inherent in human sacrifice may have been important for social structure and ritual practices, and may have been key to forming solidarity, negotiating social status between lineages, and enforcing social norms.

In the chapter “[Trade and Trauma Along the Silk Road, the Evidence from the Western Frontier of China and Mongolia \(700 BC–420 AD\)](#)”, Lee and Kuba approach the poetics of violence along the Silk Road during the second century BCE on the western frontier of modern-day China and Mongolia through the analysis of cranial trauma. They found patterns of traumatic lesions that suggest sports-related trauma as well as evidence for trepanation, scalping and facial mutilations likely consistent with both warfare and corporal punishment. Focusing on context, they note that some areas had extensive training programs likely responsible for regional patterns of traumatic lesions. The identification of mutilation (linked to corporal punishments) suggests a public display of violence that imparted important cultural values and norms to the community at large. The authors also note that sports-related traumatic lesions highlight community ties, and note that violent interaction (whether through sports, warfare, or corporal punishments) may clarify how alliances formed and dissolved along the Silk Road.

In the chapter “[Postmortem Cranial Impalement During the Middle Yayoi Period, North Kyushu, Japan](#)”, Padgett focuses on Yayoi Period burials from modern-day Japan dating to between 300 BCE and 250 CE. Looking at concepts of postmortem violence and postmortem trauma, Padgett focuses on the postmortem processing of

individuals whose heads were severed from their bodies and displayed before ultimately being reunited with their bodies for burial. These are formulaic acts, often in individuals that display little to no evidence of perimortem injury. Using a poetics approach, he examines the role of the ritualized killing and display of defeated leaders and transfer of control to new lineages or political entities with the ultimate disposal of the defeated leader with the rest of the body as a sign of respect. Within this chapter, he draws on multiple lines of evidence, including historical sources, to understand the role that this display and postmortem violence (the severing of the head) may have had during the Yayoi period.

In the chapter “[Investigating the Risk of Violence During the Neolithic to the Late Iron Age in Northeast Thailand \(c. 1400 B.C. – A.D. 800\)](#)”, Pedersen and Domett focus on physical violence and social inequality in what is now northeast Thailand from the Neolithic to the Late Iron Age (c. 1400 BC—AD 800) through an analysis of health and traumatic indicators at seven sites. They note an overall increase in the frequency of traumatic lesions from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age and then a reduction in frequency between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. Changes to the frequencies in traumatic lesions by estimated sex suggest that the social role of violence shifted with increasing population densities and changing social realities. Increases in lesions attributed to interpersonal violence are present in the Bronze Age as well as increases in lesions attributed to accident or subsistence activities (e.g., pastoralists have a different pattern of traumatic fracture than hunter-gatherers). Nutritional disturbances and markers of activity were also examined along the same long arc of history. With sedentism comes increased markers of habitual activity such as those related to farming or pastoral activity within the Bronze Age. Inequality is viewed through multiple lines of evidence, from differences in the markers of activity and increased instances of nutritional stress as well as archaeological burial context. The authors draw upon poetics to understand how inequality is performed and negotiated through these different contexts as the material culture created by social hierarchy and stratification.

In the chapter “[The Poetics of Human Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt](#)”, Campbell explores the phenomenon of human sacrifice in the early stages of the ancient Egyptian state. The sacrifice of hundreds of individuals to accompany the earliest kings of Egypt into the afterlife seems like a clear example of royal violence. Yet despite evidence for perimortem trauma in some of the human remains, and hundreds of other images showing the king enacting violence on enemies of Egypt, the occurrence of human sacrifice seems to be entirely absent from Egyptian text and imagery. Perhaps, Campbell argues, what appears to be a clear-cut case of state-sanctioned violence to us today was viewed somewhat differently by the ancient Egyptians. The sacrifice of court officials and craftspeople appears as a feature of state formation in multiple other ancient societies, and seems to fall into a different category than other forms of violence, such as conquest. Only when we understand that conceptions of violence are deeply rooted in cultural context, in ideas of insiders and outsiders, right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable force, can we begin to see how violence works and is used within a society, especially one struggling to maintain power among the elites in times of state formation and crisis.

In the chapter “[The Poetics of Massacre in Copper Age Croatia: Integrative Analysis of the Mass Grave at Potočani](#)”, Novak and colleagues examine the poetics of a massacre that occurred during the Copper Age at the site of Potočani in eastern Croatia dating to c. 4200 BCE. Combining multiple lines of evidence (archaeological, bioarchaeological, and chemical), they show how the destruction of a community can be used to create identity through the destruction of the ‘other.’ The authors focus specifically on the physicality of the body as a mechanism for messaging, from the acts of killing the individuals to the creation of the mass grave. This case study highlights the need for understanding typical and atypical grave patterns as well, and how we begin to put things into typical and atypical categories.

In the chapter “[The Poetics of Violence at Phaleron](#)”, Buikstra and colleagues explore the burials of individuals from the Archaic Period (c. 700—480 BCE) from the site of Phaleron. In their analysis, the authors layer on reconstructions of physical and structural violence as well as necropolitics to begin to understand the burials of individuals found with markers of subjugation such as manacles and chains. Focusing on 10 adult males recovered from mass graves found in similar contexts, they compare these individuals to 10 from more typical contexts. The authors found that the individuals from atypical contexts had a different lived experience, with different diets and likely different occupations. In their work, the authors highlight the importance of context for overall interpretation of lived experience in the past, and through a poetics approach, they show that the circumstances in which individuals are found (being the physical manifestation of the performance of their deaths) can illuminate more about lived experience.

In the chapter “[The Poetics of Power and Violence in Roman Iron Age Denmark](#)”, Collier examines the paradox of violence within Roman Iron Age sites (c. AD 1—400) in modern-day Denmark. Focusing on questions of power and violence, Collier focuses on how violence (physical and structural) can be used to negotiate and renegotiate power relationships. She examines burials from both higher- and lower-status burials to begin to understand how different lived experiences resulted in varied patterns of trauma that would have resulted from different types of violent interactions, i.e., status in life dictated different exposures to violent interaction or that violent interaction was performed differently based on status. Collier describes violence during the Roman Iron Age as a “complex dance of power.” Power in multiple forms (ideological, economic, political, and military) used the display of violence to create frameworks for community interaction. Violence and power were inextricably linked, and these different power relationships become clearer and richer through the examination of multiple lines of evidence (archaeological, historical, and bioarchaeological).

In the chapter “[Assaults and Abuse in Roman Britain: The Poetics of Violence Experienced by Women from the First to Early Fifth Centuries CE](#)”, Redfern examines the patriarchal organization of the Roman Empire focusing on the creation and maintenance of a social structure that preferred masculinity in Roman period Britain between the first and fifth century CE. In particular, the masculine-focused Roman power structure impacted female lives through “a web of violence,” ranging from proscriptions regarding gender roles and activities (and the enforcement of

them through violent means) to differential burial patterns based on social standing and gender. Using an osteobiographical approach, Redfern explores individuals' experiences through multiple lines of evidence, looking at the intersection of status and gender. In this way, she explores the dialectic between individual and collective meaning of the cultural performances of violence.

In the chapter “[The Poetics of Violence in Post-Medieval England: Identification of Gendered Performative Violence in the Past](#)”, Zuckerman and colleagues combine a poetics approach with cultural violence and intersectional models, looking at the role of violence in post-medieval London (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries AD). They examine indicators of direct violence such as rib fractures, craniofacial trauma, and cranial depression fractures in the context of skimmingtons (violent public shamings that punished community members for digressions against social norms) as a way to understand the public performance of violence in systemic ways to communicate cultural messages. While they were not able to conclusively identify evidence of skimmingtons within the assemblages, they were able to identify traumatic lesions suggestive of the practice. The analysis, with its focus on the intertwining lines of evidence, suggests that other forms of performative acts should be a focus of future study, particularly through highly contextualized approaches.

Finally, in the “[Conclusion](#)”, we examine threads present in the case studies and explore the applicability of poetics theory in bioarchaeology. What can we learn from treating violence as a meaning-laden act embedded within a social and cultural context? How do these findings affect how bioarchaeology as a field moves forward and engages with communities past and present? And how can nuanced studies of the complexity of violence aid our understanding of human nature past and present?

Together, these case studies make a strong case for the application of poetics to the bioarchaeological study of violence and to bioarchaeology in general. Each chapter engages with poetics to a different degree and weaves other theoretical approaches and models into their analyses, consistent with a biocultural approach to bioarchaeology (e.g., Armelagos, 2003; Zuckerman & Armelagos, 2011; Zuckerman & Martin, 2016). This approach incorporates multiple theoretical models to understand lived experience in the past, and the authors of these chapters thread structural violence, performance, intersectionality and several others throughout their chapters, adding to the rich interpretations of life in the past.

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**Part I**  
**Asia**



# Performative Violence and Power: Human Sacrifice as a Mechanism to Establish Group Identity and Social Organization in Early Bronze Age China



Jenna M. Dittmar, Elizabeth S. Berger, Ruilin Mao, Hui Wang,  
and Hui-Yuan Yeh

**Abstract** Human sacrifice was practiced in many Neolithic and Bronze Age societies. This chapter seeks to explore the complex relationships between violence, power and societal organization during the Bronze Age by presenting skeletal evidence of human sacrifice from a cemetery site located in Mogou (磨沟), Lintan County, Gansu Province, China, a site associated with the Qijia material culture complex. Here we present an assessment of the skeletal remains of an adult male with evidence of perimortem sharp force injuries to the upper thoracic region of the spine who was buried in a tomb shaft. The sharp-force injuries present on this individual, as well as the burial location and postmortem treatment, suggest that this individual was likely a victim of human sacrifice. The placement of a sacrificial victim within the tomb shaft suggests that sacrifices were made to honor the deceased buried within the tomb, thus establishing a clear hierarchical relationship between those buried within and those placed outside. This suggests that human sacrifice was employed as a culturally-sanctioned mechanism to establish group

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identity as well as to create and maintain social organization. The findings of this study advance our understanding of the social structure and ritual practices performed at the Mogou site and pave the way for continuing research on the mortuary traditions within the Qijia cultural horizon.

**Keywords** Trauma · Poetics of violence · Qijia culture horizon · Bioarchaeology · Bronze Age · Human sacrifice · Northwest China

## 1 Introduction

Human sacrifice, at the intersection between ritual and violence, was practiced in many of the small-scale and complex societies of the Neolithic and Bronze Age (c. 8000–256 BCE) in what is now China (Chang, 1983; Flad, 2008; Fung, 2000; Liu, 2000; Reinhart, 2015). The most dramatic evidence of this practice comes from the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE). Excavations have found evidence of mass human sacrifice, and Shang texts, the very earliest known written texts from China, describe human and animal sacrifice performed on a large scale to maintain state martial and ritual power (Yuan & Flad, 2005). However, the broader and perhaps more heterogeneous cultural significance of this practice is illustrated by the substantial number of archaeological excavations that have revealed evidence of human sacrifice in various contexts throughout these time periods (Bulling, 1977; Huang, 1990). Many of these examples occur in places beyond and times before states such as the Shang existed, so additional explanations are needed to fully understand the cultural significance of the practice of human sacrifice across time and space. Though the mortuary and material culture analysis of these cases has been meticulous, more detailed osteological analysis of the victims is needed to understand the significance and exact deployment of the practice.

To that end, this study describes skeletal evidence that further supports the hypothesis that human sacrifice was practiced in the Bronze Age population buried at the cemetery site of Mogou (磨沟), Lintan County, Gansu Province, China, a site associated with the Qijia material culture complex. We also consider the broader, regional archaeological context to explore the meaning of this practice within the Qijia and other contemporaneous material cultures. As Whitehead notes (2004b: 68), “the meaning of a violent death cannot be entirely understood by reference to biological origins, sociological functions, or material and ecological necessities but has to be appreciated for the way in which it is also a cultural expression of the most fundamental and complex kind.”

We therefore explore the role that performative violence may have had in the creation and maintenance of power dynamics and social hierarchy among the people of Mogou, by examining archaeological and mortuary evidence of human sacrifice through a “poetics” lens (Whitehead, 2004a, b, 2007).

## 2 Human Sacrifice in Early China

Evidence of sacrifice from the Neolithic and early Bronze Age in China is relatively scant within the archaeological record, but the analysis of this body of evidence is essential in order to explore how this practice developed over time. During the Neolithic, animals, primarily domesticated animals such as pigs, were the main source of sacrificial beings (Yuan & Flad, 2005). Animals were ritually sacrificed in many Neolithic cultures located throughout the Yellow River Valley, including the Dawenkou (ca. 3000–2600 BCE) located in the lower Yellow River region, the Longshan (3000–1950 BCE) in the Middle Yellow River region and the Majiayao culture (3300–2000 BCE) from the Upper Yellow River region (Liu & Chen, 2012; Wang, 1999). These examples, from the late Neolithic cultures in the Yellow River Region, show several clear transitions in ritualistic practices, progressing from a collective, group focus towards one prioritizing individuals. This unequal treatment of individuals reflects the development of stratified social organization, a trend that emerged more clearly in the subsequent Bronze Age (Liu, 2000).

Although the majority of the early sacrificial victims at the Neolithic-Bronze Age transition were animals (Okamura, 2002), evidence of human sacrifice is present during the Neolithic and became increasingly widespread in Bronze Age cultures throughout Northwest China. To date, the most archaeologically well-attested location of human sacrifice during this period is the Neolithic megasite of Shimao (2300–1800 BCE), located in the Ordos region of northern Shaanxi Province. So far, ten pits containing between one and 24 human skulls that have evidence of perimortem sharp-force trauma and burning have been found below the initial construction layer (Sun et al., 2018). Evidence of human sacrifice based on mortuary practices, rather than osteological analysis, has also been reported from Bronze Age sites associated with the Siwa (1900–1500 BCE) and Xindian (1500–1000 BCE) material cultures (Shelach-Lavi, 2015). At Erligang, an early Shang walled-town in Zhengzhou, dated to 1460–1384 BCE, several pits containing the skulls of sacrificed people were found (Yuan & Flad, 2005), and an excavation at the middle Shang site of Xiaoshuangqiao, dated to ca. 1435–1410 BCE, revealed a pit that contained approximately 100 sacrificial skulls, that were mostly men (Zhuanjiazuo, 2000).

Even as human sacrifice became more common during the Bronze Age, it is clear that animal sacrifice continued to play an important role in ritualistic offerings. Pits containing the remains of both human and animal sacrifices have been found at several Bronze Age sites in the Yellow River valley, including Zhengzhou and Xiaoshuangqiao (Yuan & Flad, 2005), which could suggest that some humans were being perceived and treated in a similar manner to animals. It is relatively certain that these pits were meant to be sacrificial: the contents and their position under building foundations is consistent with later textually attested sacrificial practices. Animal bones from these contexts also sometimes demonstrate processing and further detailed analysis of the skeletal remains is necessary in order to reconstruct of the nature of the tool marks observed in these cases.

These early examples of human sacrifice seem to have influenced the most dramatic known period of human sacrifice in ancient China, the Shang dynasty

(1600–1046 BCE). The Shang dynasty's state religion and political systems were organized on the basis of kinship relations and centered on ancestor worship rituals (Chang, 1980). Oracle bones—divination texts inscribed on cattle scapulae and tortoise plastrons, and the earliest form of Chinese written language—have been excavated from caches at Yinxu (occupied 1250–1046 BCE), the capital of the late Shang dynasty located near modern-day Anyang. The oracle bones record a staggering total of at least 14,197 human victims used in various state rituals (Hu, 1974: 57). War captives destined for sacrifice were recorded in the same context as sheep and other sacrificial beings, indicating their classification as something akin to livestock (Campbell, 2014); a parallel to the co-burial of sacrificed human and animal remains in earlier Bronze Age contexts. Multiple Chinese characters have been identified in the oracle bones that specify how humans were sacrificed with the most common methods including beheading, dismemberment, beating, burning, burying alive and drowning (Qiu & Fowler, 1985; Xu, 1988).

Decades of excavations at Yinxu have corroborated this textual record, revealing vast numbers of human skeletons placed at the foundations of important buildings, in sacrificial pits, or in royal tombs—“human sacrifice proper” (Campbell, 2014: 96). The scale of this type of human sacrifice at Yinxu is best demonstrated by the presence of more than 1000 sacrificial pits, each containing up to 12 human skeletons (Chang, 1980; Hu, 1974; Yang, 1986; Yang & Yang, 1977; Zhongguo & Yanjiusuo, 1985). A related and more limited phenomenon is the sacrifice of “death attendants,” who were given dignified burials in kings' and nobles' tombs and lack evidence of violent deaths. A third category of burials at Yinxu, are those placed in refuse pits, who are also thought to be sacrificial victims, though these individuals do not show evidence of perimortem trauma (Zhang et al., 2016).

This well-studied example of human sacrifice in the ancient world was closely tied to the enactment of lineage power, the justification of war as a divine act, and the separation of Shang civilization from its dehumanized, conquered enemies (Campbell, 2014). The practice of mass religious sacrifice seems to have ended after the Shang dynasty; only the act of sacrificing death attendants continued on a smaller scale into the Zhou period and beyond.

### 3 Biocultural Context: The Qijia Culture

The Qijia culture (2200–1600 BCE) is found throughout Northwest China, including the western Loess Plateau, the eastern Hexi Corridor, the eastern Qinghai Plateau, and throughout the upper Yellow River Valley and its tributaries (Chen, 2013; Mao et al., 2009; Xie, 2002; Xie et al., 2009). This is the region through which many elements of material culture and technology were exchanged between North Asia, Central Asia and China (Campbell, 2014; Liu & Chen, 2012; Mei, 2003; Womack et al., 2017). It is thought that the people associated with this widespread material culture led a sedentary life, living in small settlements of 5.3–7.5 hectares (An et al., 2005). Qijia Culture sites represent diverse subsistence strategies, including