Chapter 9
Talking Bones: Bioarchaeological Analysis of Individuals from Palpa

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Abstract Bioarchaeology, the scientific discipline that studies past societies through human remains, has had an uneven development in Peru. One of the zones of lesser development has been the south coast, probably due to the lack of scientifically recovered collections accessible to investigators. Most studies centre on the skull: cranial deformations, trephinations, and trophy heads, but little is known about the biological characteristics and levels of adaptation of the prehistoric human populations that inhabited the area.

In this work we present the results of the osteological analysis of 198 individuals recovered from funerary contexts excavated by the Nasca–Palpa Archaeological Project. The levels of adaptation of Archaic, Paracas, Nasca, and Middle Horizon populations are evaluated through demography, comparative statures, spongiosclerosis, and trauma analysis. The tendencies found suggest that the best levels were achieved during the Archaic, and the worst in Paracas. Other important findings include a differential distribution of trauma among women and men in Paracas and Nasca times, suggesting gendered activities. Finally, there is a rising through time of trauma attributable to interpersonal violence, reaching the highest point in Nasca, when also two cases of possible child abuse are identified.

9.1 Introduction

Bioarchaeology is a more or less recent development of the physical anthropological sciences. The term ‘bioarchaeology’ proposed by Dr. Jane Buikstra in a symposium held in 1976, makes reference to a new approach, focusing on the cooperative work between archaeologists and biological anthropologists in order to deal with new questions from a problem-oriented standpoint (Buikstra 1991). It also refers to the
study of faunal and botanical remains found in archaeological contexts (Buikstra 2006). In this chapter we use it only in reference to human remains.

Among the issues addressed by bioarchaeology are the differential health and adaptation levels within and between populations, the diet, patterns of activity, genetic relations, human migrations, paleopathology, trauma, and paleodemography. In 30 years of existence, this discipline not only has enriched significantly the knowledge of past societies, but as Ortner (2006) points out, because culture is an important component of human societies, human biology is better understood in the context of the associated culture.

Throughout these years, in addition to the metrical and morphological examination of bones with the assistance of X-rays and tomography, new and more sophisticated techniques, such as DNA and isotope analysis or electron microscopy have been incorporated as current practices in bioarchaeology. Also, the strong development of forensic anthropology in relation to human rights violations in the last decade opened the door to new issues, such as the identification of perimortem trauma and patterns of violence in past societies (Martin and Frayer 1997).

In Peru the development of bioarchaeology has been uneven. The first insights into this discipline come from the pioneering investigations of Pedro Weiss (1958, 1961), who studied osteological collections coming from all around Peru and proposed the approach of the ‘cultural osteology’, defined as the study of human remains from the standpoint of its cultural context. Unfortunately this approach didn’t have continuity and there was a 30-year period of very scarce studies of human remains in Peru, mainly accomplished by physicians and dentists who weren’t familiar with the cultural contexts. A special mention should be made regarding the isolated studies on the human remains of Cerro Paloma (Benfer 1986, 1990). Then, from the decade of the 1990s on there was a strong development of this kind of studies related to the creation of Centro Mallqui, a cultural institution devoted to the preservation and investigation of pre-Hispanic human remains. Also, the study of human remains has flourished in the north coast, alongside with renewed interest in the archaeology of the Moche culture that followed the spectacular discovery of The Lord of Sipan. Finally, in recent years other bioarchaeological contributions have clustered around the discovery of Inka funerary contexts near Puruchuco (central coast) and archaeological research in the Cotahuasi Canyon in the southern highlands.

Surprisingly, the south coast, located between the Cañete and Acari valleys, an area that was the scene of important pre-Hispanic cultural developments such as Paracas and Nasca has received little attention by bioarchaeologists. The major reason for that is probably the lack of accessible collections of human remains coming from scientifically controlled excavations. The main south coastal collections are still those gathered by Julio C. Tello and his team in the early twentieth century. According to published data (Tello and Mejia 1979) almost 1000 individuals were recovered from funerary contexts on the Paracas Peninsula. The expeditions to the Nasca valley, on the other hand,