

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

14 February 2022

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Dear Members of the Selection Committee,

I am applying for the position of Ad Astra Fellow with an affiliation in the School of Archaeology. I am currently a postdoctoral College Fellow in Archaeological Science in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University. I use osteoarchaeology to examine how social inequalities become manifested in human bodies, focusing on the biocultural consequences of increasing social complexity. My work incorporates multiple lines of evidence, including human skeletal remains, material culture, isotopic signatures of diet and mobility, and radiocarbon dating. My research has been funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation and the European Commission, and I have published my results in journals such as *Antiquity*, *American Antiquity*, and *European Journal of Archaeology*. My multi-scalar emphasis on flexibility and change in prehistoric societies has implications for contemporary communities developing strategies for handling the challenges precipitated by the pandemic, climate change, and political instability. As such, my scholarship would lend a deep historical perspective to the challenges addressed by the *Empowering Humanity* strategic theme of the Ad Astra initiative.

My earlier research investigated the nature and extent of embodied inequalities in communities beginning to intensify subsistence practices, expand exchange networks, and increase population densities—issues that continue to have implications for contemporary societies. My initial fieldwork addressed the possibility of multiple pathways to settlement nucleation and growth. At 113 ha in size, the Copper Age (c. 3250–2200 BCE) site of Marroquies in Jaén, Spain, was one of the largest villages in Iberia during this period. Other complex sites in the region have been characterized by evidence of increasing inequality, including stark disparities in grave goods, dietary differentiation, long-distance exchange of exotic materials, and influxes of non-local individuals. Marroquies was, however, a local phenomenon, with limited evidence for long-distance exchange, elaborate craftsmanship, or inter-group distinctions in diet. My work demonstrates that there were many trajectories by which large-scale villages first emerged in late prehistoric Europe. However, Marroquies also collapsed after a few generations; understanding why local populations could not support this scale of occupation informs current debates about the costs and benefits of aggregating into complex communities.

My two ongoing research projects explore how embodied inequalities vary relative to local political, economic, and ecological factors. First, I am analyzing the human remains from the Copper Age enclosure of Los Melgarejos in Getafe, central Spain. My unexpected results at Marroquies prompted me to ask whether similar processes were at work in smaller towns and villages. Los Melgarejos allows me to examine the biocultural impact of prehistoric transformations at a smaller settlement within a distinct cultural and ecological context than the mega-sites of southern Spain. I am collaborating with archaeologists at the University of Cambridge to take a humanistic, osteobiographical approach, using osteoarchaeological evidence to understand the lived experience of individuals who may have been marked in both life and death. Secondly, I co-direct “Mortuary Archaeology of the Râmpeț Bronze Age Landscape,” a

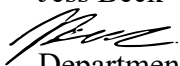
project that offers biocultural insight into power, competition, and territoriality in one of the richest metal procurement zones in the world. This osteoarchaeological project combines excavation, skeletal analysis, and isotopic investigation of sites from Early Bronze Age Transylvania. The project began with pilot mapping in 2016, three weeks of osteoarchaeological data collection in July 2017, and three months of excavation and skeletal data collection with both undergraduate and graduate students in 2018 and 2019; though past two field seasons have been postponed due to the pandemic, upcoming field seasons will continue to involve students.

Just as my research is undertaken with student involvement, it likewise provides the case studies which I use to teach about the human past. To date I have developed and taught eight archaeology courses as instructor of record. One of my primary pedagogical goals is to provide my students with an archaeological perspective on the intricate relationship between human biology and culture. To enact these goals, my teaching engages students through use of active learning techniques and an inclusive pedagogy. In *Introduction to Archaeology*, I instruct students to collect data on masking signage across campus to consider the spatial distribution of material culture, and in *Osteoarchaeology* I have them craft models of the innominate bone out of clay to familiarize themselves with the structure of the bony pelvis. At UCD, I am prepared to supervise lower-level courses such as *Introduction to Archaeology* and *Human Osteology*. I also envision developing upper-level seminars which investigate the intersection of biology, social identity, and embodied human experience, such as *Inequality and the Body Across Time*.

I am committed to mentoring students inside and outside of the classroom. In 2015 and 2017 I co-authored poster presentations at national conferences with former undergraduate mentees. One presentation on the osteoarchaeology of looting was later published as a co-authored article in *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*. My teaching has been recognized by three teaching awards and a position as a teaching consultant at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan. My outreach efforts at my blog *Bone Broke* have been used as a teaching resource at 25 different institutions and viewed over 520,000 times. I am also dedicated to fostering opportunities for intradepartmental discussion and collaboration. At Cambridge, I participated in multiple public science events and acted as co-chair of the Bioarchaeology Reading Group, a biweekly gathering of scholars focused on discussing new methods and theory in osteoarchaeology. At Harvard, I am coordinating the Archaeology Seminar series, which provides a platform for fostering discussion with visiting archaeologists.

My fieldwork-based research and combined archaeological and biological focus complement the global, holistic scope of the School of Archaeology. My work provides an osteoarchaeological perspective on issues of embodiment, inequality, health disparities, gender, diet, and migration, in both the past and present. My interests intersect with those of many faculty members in your School, and I look forward to discussing Bronze Age mortuary landscapes with Joanna Bruck and the osteoarchaeology of mountain communities with Graeme Warren. My upcoming isotopic research also raises the possibility of collaborating with the NCIG. My supporting materials and contact information for three references are attached. Thank you for considering my application.

Sincerely,  
Jess Beck



Department of Anthropology, Harvard University