

RECENT DISCOVERIES ON THE FIRST INHABITANTS OF THE MEXICALI VALLEY

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Surveys and explorations were done on the northwest part of the Mexicali Valley during the last months of the summer of 2003. This survey's main goal was to find possible new hunter-fisher and gatherer sites that would give us a better understanding of the area's ancient history. This project, which had started as a salvage archaeological project, was also requested to determine whether or not these sites would be affected by the imminent construction of a highway planned to connect the Tijuana-Mexicali highway (MEX 2D) to the Mexicali-San Felipe highway (MEX 5) and in doing so, help avoid the passage of heavy traffic through the city of Mexicali.

As many of the researchers involved in Mexican archaeology know, the northern Mexican territories have not received much attention from national researchers for a long time. In many ways it could be said that this situation has favoured international scholars, who have had many opportunities over the years to survey, explore, and excavate in these territories and correlate this work with timelines used in the areas on the other side of the border. Fortunately, this lack of interest shown by the national researchers is changing and it can be said that more people at the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH), as well as researchers from the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), are now becoming more interested in the hunter-fisher and gatherer groups of these vast northern lands.

For me, this project had a more personal and professional interest, firstly because I was coming back to my state and secondly because it was my first true challenge. It could be said that it was my debut at having total responsibility for a project that, even though it was small, had its own ups and downs as well as many gratifying moments. As a salvage archaeology project, not much was expected from it, though the work had to be done by a certain date. It had been decided that a clear scientific method would be followed that would enable us to understand more about the history of the region. It would also — or so at least we hoped — shed some light on where these hunter-fisher and gatherer groups had come from, how they lived, what might have caused them to change their ways of social organization, and what lessons we could learn from their experience in this harsh land.

The team gathered for this archaeological research was composed of Oswaldo Cuadra and myself, both students from ENAH. Logistical and academic support was graciously provided by Julia Bendímez Patterson,

director of INAH's Baja California office, and researcher Moisés Valadez Moreno from the INAH office in Nuevo León.

The project involved the survey of 20 km of desert near the Sierra Cucapá where, as mentioned previously, a highway is going to be constructed by the La Rumorosa-Mexicali Highway Trust (FIARUM) so that traffic can go around the city of Mexicali. As stated earlier, the project was focused on identifying archaeological sites that may lie in the construction area and determining whether or not they would suffer any damage. Tremendous responsibility was felt during the planning and implementation of the project, as well as in applying all of the concepts we had learned at university to a professional-level project, knowing that we were the first young Mexican researchers following in the footsteps of local researchers Julia Bendímez Patterson and Jorge Serrano, who have worked on the prehistory of this area for a long time.

METHODS OF SURVEY, SITE RECORDING, AND ARTIFACT ANALYSIS

As we were preparing ourselves to get started on the project, we thought the first phase should be the research on manuscripts and books concerning previous works done on both sides of the border by different authors like Julia Bendímez Patterson (1987, 1991, 2002), Jay von Werlhof (1995), Don Laylander (1987), Eric W. Ritter (1992), and others with the aim on obtaining as much information as possible on the area. We also tried to find out what strategy was the best to follow in order to have the work done with precision but at a fast rate. So we asked several people who had worked on related hunter and gatherer sites in other areas to give us advice on how it would be best to proceed and whether they thought that the social behaviour of these groups would have been any

different from that of others that had been studied previously in the northern territories.

After having a talk over the phone with researcher M. Valadez Moreno from the INAH Center in Nuevo León, it was decided to organize the survey of the area by completing systematic transects, approximately 5 km long with a width of 500 m, which would be rectangular in shape and enable us to cover an average area of 2.5 km² per day. When this average is stated, it has to be considered that the summer months in the area are hottest, with temperatures that can be up to 55° C on the shade. Bearing this inconvenience in mind, the schedule of the day's work was a little bit awkward, starting at 5:30 a.m. and finishing around 11 a.m. or noon if the weather was agreeable. The rest of the afternoon was spent at the laboratory doing analysis, researching and starting the compilation of the *informe* or report that had to be done for the Archaeological Council in Mexico City, as well as trying to get any conclusions from the sites found.

It was during this phase that we had to complete the "Registro Público de Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas" ("public record of archaeological monuments and sites") form. This form is given to all projects by INAH with the sole aim of having a record of every single site found on the national soil in its archives for future generations to consult and to see which areas have been investigated before, how they have been investigated, and who were the local or foreign researchers who had investigated them. For each site that was found, one of these forms had to be completed, and in addition an identification paper was filled out. The identification paper was necessary so that the descriptions of the sites could be more accurate, because the official forms were designed to describe sites found in Mesoamerica and so are not too compatible with prehistoric hunter-gatherer sites.

It should be mentioned that the method I used for preparing the identification paper and recording the sites was based on the one developed and used by M. Valadez (1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002) in his projects in the state of Nuevo León. This method made it easier to codify the artifacts found with only the site number and helped broaden the analysis of the tools and flakes without any confusion about the area and general origin. Also it was decided that the samples for carbon dates were to be collected only on those sites that were placed strategically and that we thought were going to be able to give us good dates.

The sites that we found and worked on were located on maps from the National Institute of Geographical

Statistics and Information (INEGI), using map number I11D64 (La Salada) and map number I11D65 (Mexicali), with the help of a GPS. We also took photographs of the environment around the site as well as of the artifacts in situ with a measuring scale and compass, before collecting them for analysis back at the laboratory. Moreover, it was agreed that samples for carbon dates were to be taken at those sites that we thought were exceptionally interesting and that had the most manifest artifact evidence.

We were happy to confirm, after a month's work, that there were 29 sites in the area pertaining to groups of hunters and gatherers. The first sites found were a challenge, since not many artifacts were present on surface. M. Rogers' *Ancient Hunters of the Far West* (1966) and Julia Bendímez's knowledge came to our rescue. Both reading and paying attention to Bendímez's advice and comments made us more aware of the types of sites and artifacts we were looking at, which made us realize we had found sleeping circles and ancient desert trails. After that, getting our eyes accustomed to the surface characteristics made it far easier to start finding this ancient Indian evidence as well as the lithic tools left behind by these first inhabitants of our Baja California desert.

The farther we got from the Sierra Cucapá and the more we entered the area near to the farming lands, the more ceramic artifacts were to be found, as well as stone tools, projectile points, a preform of a projectile point, marine and freshwater shells, a couple of beads made out of seashell, and a couple of them made from stone.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the first conclusion made after the initial findings was that the sleeping circles and the ancient trails near the Sierra Cucapá were older than the sites found in the desert sands, based on the fact that the artifacts found at the former had a desert patina that gave both the sites and the tools a darker color. It is also important to mention that at this first group of sites, only four broken pieces of ceramic were found belonging to the same jar at the site closest to the end of the sierra.

All these data made me think that these were temporary campsites of constantly moving hunter and gatherer groups, who knew the territory very well. Bearing that in mind, I decided to relate some of the theories I had been reading, thinking about, and using for my thesis, and to try to apply them to this project. As everyone knows it is difficult to determine the number of people that made up a group of hunters and gatherers, so it was important to dig out information on

Paleoindian hunter and gatherer groups as well as theories on the division of work in this kind of culture.

Based on the above and on the fact that it is known that there was a huge lake called "Lake Cahuilla" near the area about 15,000 years ago, it may have been possible to obtain food resources both from the water (fish and shellfish) and from the desert and sierra (game and seeds). It cannot be ruled out, even if the lake was probably partially dry at the time, that these campsites were used seasonally. Spring and summer were the seasons with by far the most mobility, with movement to the northwest in the direction of the Sierra Cucapá in search of shelter when the days started to get colder during the autumn and winter seasons.

According to James Dixon (1999), the number of people that composed a group of hunters and gatherers might have varied depending on the seasons and across long spans of time. During certain times, when food and resources were abundant, the groups may have been composed of 30 or up to 60 people, while during more difficult periods the group could have divided into bands of one or two families at most. In addition, pre-tribal communities may organize themselves into basic units of production and consumption, as proposed by L. F. Bate (1998). The social organization of these minimal bands must have been based on equal rights and obligations. Also, work and rank were probably divided by sex, age group, and personal qualities (based on the same rights and obligations).

On this basis, and seen from the perspective of a social organization, it may not be correct to abandon the idea that a division of labour could have been practiced among these groups, as suggested by the fact that pottery was manufactured at the time. If we explore the idea more carefully, we may propose that the women during those times would have done the gathering of fruits and seeds, hunted small animals, as well as manufacturing baskets and pottery. Meanwhile the men would have been occupied with the fishing, hunting, and creating lithic artifacts for various activities. With respect to this last point, I would clarify that the women would certainly have been capable of making the stone tools needed for their everyday chores, such as small scrapers, knives, and choppers. Maybe the elderly took care of the young ones as well as passing on knowledge about the ways of nature and telling stories, and both generations would surely have helped out with gathering seeds, roots, and firewood.

Finally, I also consider that primary goods and technologies for the manufacturing of projectile points were exchanged with the southern parts of the state of California, in light of the fact that there is an abundance

of flint and chert in the area. Also obsidian is found at two or three sites and was sent to Dr. Steven Shackley at the University of California, Berkeley, and this leads me to suggest the idea of some sort of exchange with the groups that inhabited the both the Pacific and the Sea of Cortez areas.

To ascertain the time period when these groups inhabited the area, radiocarbon dates were requested for a few samples of shell, yielding dates of 1690 to 2320 B.P. These results put the sites at the end of the Early Pacific Period and extending into the transition to the Middle Pacific Period. According to the Chartkoffs, the Pacific Period in general is characterized by "the development of a new approach to focal economy...the rise of complex societies and the penetration of new aquatic ecological niches" (Chartkoff and Chartkoff 1984:146-147). The indigenous groups of this period learned that by collecting certain crops in large quantities and saving surpluses for harder times, they would be able to support larger groups of people. "The collection, storage, and redistribution of surpluses allowed the Pacific cultures to raise the carrying capacity of their environment" (Chartkoff and Chartkoff 1984:148). According to the authors, resources had to be seasonally abundant and of high nutritional value, with the capacity to support large groups once the technological and social organizational matters were arranged to permit extensive exploitation. By the use of cooperative group labour, the groups during this period learned how to harvest great amounts of such resources as well as how to store the surplus for use throughout the year, varying according to the regional conditions in which they were living, which gave rise to more complicated pre-tribal societies.

I would like to end by letting the reader know that we still do not know what the Archaeological Council is going to decide on the matter of issuing the constructions permit after they finish reading the report on the work done last summer. Nonetheless I venture to say that the sites are not in harm's way for now, if the construction company follows our recommendations and sticks to the work plan they showed us at the time.

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