

THE CONSTRUCTION OF FRONTIERS AND BOUNDARIES IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

As the introductory paper in the symposium on the construction of group boundaries, this paper examines several critical questions on defining ethnic, linguistic, or political boundaries using archaeological data. What kinds of archaeological materials are the most suited to the identification of boundaries? What kinds of spatial patterns are expected to occur in boundary contexts? Finally, what can be said about the blurring of material traits on the borders of ethnic or linguistic groups? These questions provide the background for introducing the diverse range of issues that will be raised by the symposium participants.

Introduction

I welcome you to our symposium on "The Construction of Native Group Boundaries in Northern California Archaeology," co-chaired by Antoinette Martinez and myself. The purpose of the symposium is to examine current theoretical models and analytical methods employed to delineate the boundaries of ethnic, linguistic and/or political groups in archaeological contexts. As the introductory paper in the session, I begin by outlining the current status of boundary studies in California archaeology. I then raise three issues for consideration in future studies of group boundaries. Finally, I introduce the symposium participants and how they are addressing different kinds of boundaries and boundary processes using case studies from northern California.

Boundary Studies in California Archaeology

In reviewing the current status of boundary studies in California archaeology, I consider three issues: how boundaries are theoretically conceptualized; what kinds of material culture are employed in the construction and definition of boundaries; and how successful have archaeologists been in defining linguistic, ethnic, and political boundaries using material remains.

1) Theoretical Perspective

I think most archaeologists working in California conceptualize the boundaries between native groups as sharply defined, semipermeable cultural barriers similar to those depicted in ethnographic maps of Native Californian societies. Viewed from this perspective, boundaries are important markers in the regional landscape: they segregate the territory of competing groups from one another; they represent a visible line of defense for protecting homelands; and they contribute to the adaptive efficiency of populations who are in direct competition with other nearby groups (see review in Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). It is commonly argued that group identification and

boundary maintenance will increase in situations where people are competing for space and valued resources (e.g., Abruzzi 1982, Yesner 1985). Consequently, by establishing semipermeable cultural boundaries in frontier zones, people on opposite sides of the border may restrict social interactions, filter information exchange, and limit the movement of some material goods between competing groups. This perspective implies that tightly bounded linguistic, ethnic and political entities should be recognizable in the archaeological record by discrete spatial patterns of diagnostic material remains.

2) Material Culture

The construction of boundaries between native groups has been based on various lines of archaeological evidence. These lines include topographic landmarks, such as valleys and mountains that delimit natural barriers to travel and communication, and regional settlement patterns that denote discrete clusters of sites separated by buffer zones in the outlying hinterland. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, two kinds of studies of material remains were initiated to evaluate boundary lines drawn between site clusters and regional settlement systems using independent lines of evidence: information exchange and sourcing studies.

Research on style and information exchange was undertaken as a means of decoding group identities through detailed stylistic analyses of highly visible artifacts. Wobst (1977), Wiessner (1983) and others have argued that specific kinds of artifacts that are visible to all members of a group can transmit information on group identity. According to this model, artifacts serving as emblems for marking group boundaries carry distinct messages that are both uniform and clear to their target groups. Wiessner (1983), basing her conclusions on an ethnoarchaeological study of metal projectile points among the Kalahari San, argues that artifacts signaling group identity should be visible in the archaeological record as discrete spatial distributions.

Sourcing studies delineate the spatial distribution of diagnostic materials that have been transported or exchanged across regions. The basic assumption underlying this approach is that differential fall-off patterns should be evident as materials are transported across boundaries of discrete social units (Ericson and Meighan 1984, Findlow and Bolognese 1984, Hughes 1986). This approach is exemplified in California by exchange studies that have attempted to define ethnolinguistic units through the spatial analysis of obsidian artifacts. Employing ethnographically defined territories as models, archaeologists have examined obsidian fall-off patterns across boundaries that separate different ethnic and/or linguistic groups.

3) The Results

The most common approach to boundary construction in California archaeology is through obsidian sourcing studies. In contrast to other regions of North America, much less research has been undertaken on style and information exchange to delineate ethnic, linguistic, or political boundaries in California. The results of sourcing studies are rather ambiguous. Significantly, there has been little success in duplicating broad scale ethnolinguistic distributions as described by California ethnographers using obsidian artifacts in either prehistoric or early historic contexts. Rather than clear-cut boundaries, obsidian distributions exhibit complex, overlapping patterns that tend to blend across historically defined ethnic/linguistic borders (e.g., Ericson and Meighan 1984). The ambiguous pattern is not all that unexpected since different kinds of obsidian artifacts and raw material types were transported through varied social and ceremonial networks that produced diverse and overlapping spatial signatures (Hughes 1986, Hughes and Bettinger 1984, Jackson 1989).

Issues for Future Research

I raise three issues for consideration in future research on boundaries in California. These issues concern: 1) the scales of analysis, 2) the complex social dynamics of boundary zones, and 3) the recognition that different kinds of boundaries and boundary processes may be observed in archaeological contexts.

First, as already noted by others (e.g., Hughes and Bettinger 1984, Hughes 1986, Ericson and Meighan 1984), broad-scale ethnolinguistic units probably represent an inappropriate scale of analysis for boundary studies in California. As ethnographic abstractions based primarily on linguistic affiliations, these ethnolinguistic units were probably not recognized by native actors, nor did they play any role in their day-to-day lifeways. Rather our ability to define group identities and boundaries, particularly using obsidian distributions, has been more successful at smaller scales of analysis—that is, at the level of individual communities, villages and even households. For example, David Fredrickson's (1989, 1993) findings of discrete obsidian fall-off patterns in the Geysers and Los Guilicos study areas suggest that boundaries of smaller sociopolitical entities, probably tribelets, are identifiable in archaeological contexts.

Second, we need to appreciate better the complex social dynamics of group boundaries in the past. Recent theoretical considerations of boundaries by Peter Sahlins (1989), Anthony Cohen (1987), and Thomas Wilson (1994) stress several points: boundaries are viewed through the eyes of individuals; they are contingent and relational; and their meaning may vary from person to person even in the same community or household. I think there is a tendency for archaeologists undertaking boundary studies to view societies as superorganic entities that act as integrated wholes. However, as Anthony Cohen (1987) notes, the broader group may be only a generalization as viewed from the perception of individual segments. Boundaries may be perceived very differently depending on an individual's sectorial interests, motivations, and day-to-day relationships. Individuals will construct their own versions of the broader community based on their extended kinship networks, affinal relations, gender, age, class, trading partnerships, and friendships, which implies that people from the same communities may conceptualize very different boundaries around themselves.

Third, we need to emphasize the study of different kinds of boundaries and boundary processes. Boundaries that serve as semipermeable barriers and produce discrete spatial patterns of diagnostic material remains represent only one kind of boundary process. Furthermore, our ability to define crisp boundaries based on obsidian fall-off patterns or discrete clusters of emblematic artifacts may be more the exception than the rule in most archaeological contexts. In examining the spatial distribution of diagnostic artifacts, archaeologists have repeatedly found that these traits tend to merge or blur at the margins of social units (DeAtley and Findlow 1984:1, Ericson and Meighan 1984, Shennan 1989). Rather than viewing the ambiguity of material remains at the margins of groups as problematic, it may be time to shift our attention to this cultural "noise" (see Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). While some boundaries may serve as barriers to travel, communication, and interpersonal relationships, it may be prudent to view other boundaries as interaction zones where peoples from different homelands and ethnic backgrounds encounter one another. Communication and social relations across these permeable borders will be facilitated by trade partnerships, intergroup marriages, regional ceremonies, political alliances, and factional competition and cooperation (see Brumfiel and Fox 1994).

In considering various kinds of boundaries that existed in Native California, we need to keep in mind that native societies in California are not homogeneous entities, and probably were not in the past. Instead, similar to all other human groups, they are characterized by structural cleavages oriented along axes of variation defined by kin, gender, age, political affiliations, and social relations. Factional groups may play an important role in boundary processes. They are smaller segments of a greater society whose members share common sectorial interests and pursue sociopolitical strategies that enhance their prestige and further their access to valued material and ceremonial resources. Boundary zones provide multiple opportunities for factional groups to promote their mutually advantageous goals in opposition to other competing factions. The kinds of strategies that may be implemented across ethnic, linguistic, and/or political boundaries are intermarriage, the cre-

ation of exchange partnerships, and ceremonial relationships—activities deliberately undertaken to cement alliances outside the group with outlying peoples who can provide perceived benefits, especially at the expense of other competing segmentary groups (see Brumfiel and Fox 1994).

My primary point is to emphasize that very different kinds of boundaries probably existed at different times and places in Native California. We may identify discrete spatial distributions of archaeological materials in some times and places that demarcate territorial boundaries of competing native societies. These situations deserve special study as they may shed light on intercommunity or intertribe territorial relationships during times of stress and conflict. However, it may be far more common for us to detect considerable blurring of archaeological remains at the margins of native societies. Rather than lamenting this archaeological “noise,” and feeling that we are failures for *not* detecting crisp patterns of material remains in the archaeological record, we should take advantage of this ambiguity to consider the implications of cross-cutting social networks and intersocietal relationships over time. By undertaking microscale analyses of archaeological remains at the margins of societies, we may better understand how individuals, households, and segmentary groups created alliance relations with peoples from other societies, how these intersocietal relationships changed over time, and how they are manifested in the archaeological record (see Lightfoot and Martinez 1995).

The Symposium

In this afternoon’s symposium, the participants will consider varied kinds of boundaries and boundary processes by employing case studies from northern California. A diverse range of innovative theoretical views and methodological approaches are advanced.

In the following paper, Antoinette Martinez presents a creative approach to boundaries as cross-cutting social networks that she is developing to examine the spatial structure of archaeological remains in Kashaya Pomo villages situated in the near hinterland of Fort Ross. Thomas Jackson then considers the meaning of boundaries, the complexity of different kinds of boundary processes, and how our perceptions of boundaries play an important role in the contemporary politics of archaeology, such as in the implementation of Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) regulations. Breck Parkman continues the discussion by considering the boundaries of the natural/supernatural worlds in Pomo cosmology, examining the archaeological implications of supernatural portals and passageways. In our fifth paper, Stephen Silliman examines some of the challenges of constructing prehistoric linguistic boundaries, and the implications that linguistic diversity may have for understanding past mobility patterns and sociopolitical organizations. Ann Schiff follows with her paper which addresses the problems of defining cultural boundaries at the scale of the village using case studies from 19th-century Native Alaskan communities in California, Alaska, and the Kurile Islands. Frank Bayham’s presentation explores the development and maintenance of multi-use, ethnic “buffer zones” in the Eagle Lake region of northeastern California through a detailed analysis of survey data and archaeofaunal remains. In our final paper, David Fredrickson presents recent results of obsidian sourcing studies in northern California that link the emergence of firm territorial boundaries with the development of sociopolitical complexity.

Many thanks for joining us this afternoon and enjoy the rest of the symposium.

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