

PRETRIBELET CULTURES IN THE NORTH COAST RANGES, CALIFORNIA

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After 40 years of doing archaeology in California's North Coast Ranges, where one of the most common site types is the so-called flake scatter, often with sparse materials and low diversity, I often think that we are missing much of the specific lifeways of pretribelet cultures, many times because the information potential of the most common site type, the flake scatter, seems so limited. I suspect that the occasional dramatic findings are due to what I call "archaeological imagination" that developed conceptual approaches specifically designed for these sites. I believe that contemporary approaches have promise to fill many data gaps for the pretribelet era and contribute much to the understanding of the careers of ethnographic California's diverse tribelets.

INTRODUCTION

For many years a major interest for many California archaeologists has been the processes involved in the development of sociocultural complexity, part of this interest has focused upon the emergence of processor cultures from earlier traveler cultures, or in Binfordian (1983) terms, the shift from forager to collector. Such typological terms are at least a partial reflection of this interest. Bettinger and Baumhoff (1982, 1983) employed the terms processor/traveler in their discussion of Great Basin subsistence strategies, and Bettinger (1991:100ff.) in a later more detailed explication, characterized the terms and their meanings as a strong model for explaining and predicting variability among hunter-gatherers, especially powerful as a tool when used for comparative studies. I admit that if I were beginning my archaeological career rather than ending it (but, of course, knowing more or less what I know now), I would enjoy carrying out such a comparative study, with the aim of understanding the developmental processes that contributed to the wide range and variety of ethnographic village communities in California.

In the North Coast Ranges and vicinity, where I have done a great deal of my archaeological work, an important concept in the study of cultural transformation has been 'resource intensification' as discussed by Basgall (1987), who suggested that precontact California was a "unique laboratory" in which to study "the nature and emergence of non-egalitarian, organizationally complex hunter-gatherers" (1987:21-22). In this important paper, Basgall explored the role of California's intensive reliance on acorns in the

development of the social elaboration among late-period acorn users.

The present paper does not offer a backward look about what I might do as an archaeologist if I could start over again. It simply offers in a somewhat random manner my reflections upon several thoughts I have had over the past several decades about a very long period in California's prehistory, especially within the North Coast Ranges and vicinity, during a time when, I suspect, diverse groups of travelers dominated the cultural landscape.

ACORN USE

My reflections begin with a story that relates to the use of acorns in precontact California. In the late 1940s at Berkeley, where I was a graduate student from 1948 through 1951, Robert Heizer once generously handed me one of his unfinished manuscripts, not solicited by me, which he had written describing methods employed throughout the world for leaching certain noxious materials to make them palatable. Efficient copying machines had not yet been developed back then, so I wrote my notes on the manuscript by hand before I returned it to Heizer. After more than fifty years I can no longer find the notes that I transcribed; they may be available in his papers, many of which are held at Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. One of my recollections is that the ethnographic Californian practice of leaching foods in a basin was unique to California. If this is true, it has important implications for California prehistory and discussions of acorns and resource intensification.

Like many others, I have believed for many years that it is highly likely that acorns were used as a food quite early in prehistoric California, prior to the introduction of mortars and pestles and their probable companion, the basin leaching method (which was probably developed by women). It is reasonable to postulate that Native Californians employed other types of leaching before the basin method appeared. For example, burying material in mud for a period of time, or placing them in running water for an extended period. Both methods had much wider distributions than the leaching basin. Unlike the leaching basin, both of these methods require more than a few days for the leaching process to be completed, meaning that those with a traveler orientation would be restricted to strategic times when they could be nearby while the leaching was taking place, in order to protect the acorns from a wide range of local animals which were likely to have competed for them. Since travelers are by definition often on the move, in-situ acorn granaries were probably not compatible with their lifeways, and acorn use may have been much more limited than it was among the processors of precontact California. It is of interest that work done by Bill Hildebrandt and Jim West at the high elevations of Pilot Ridge and South Fork Mountain in the early 1980s showed that past climatic conditions allowed oak trees to migrate to higher elevations and to become a potential subsistence resource on a seasonal basis many years before the basin method is believed to have appeared in California. Reflecting on this, I suspect that sedentism itself could have been a prerequisite for the basin method of leaching and also for the granary.

Eric Wohlgemuth, after he attended my presentation at the SCA meetings, was quite generous in sending me a copy of a paper he had written for a graduate course at UC Davis that addresses this issue (Wohlgemuth 1998). His paper documents his paleobotanical findings from archaeological deposits dating before 2500 B.P. at two localities in central California, which implies acorn use without the ethnographic basin method. At Green Valley in Solano County, with the cooperation of the excavator Randy Wiberg, Wohlgemuth interpreted unburned acorns and an associated complex of isolated pit features as passive acorn leaching pits, meaning that leaching was done without the acorns being ground. Remarkably, the features were dated between 4000 and 3000 B.P.

Wohlgemuth also reported that excavations within the Los Vaqueros reservoir area in eastern Contra Costa County yielded both acorn and buckeye remains recovered from a site component dating to 7400-9479 B.P., as well as from later sites. There is a good likelihood that whole nuts were leached, but by methods not yet clear.

THE EPHEMERAL SITE

When I was in graduate school at Berkeley, it took me some time to understand what Heizer meant when he described many archaeological sites as not important enough to excavate because they "lacked archaeological context." I had little experience in archaeology at the time and I was reluctant to ask Heizer directly what he meant; as a new graduate student, I did not care to reveal my ignorance too soon by asking questions whose answers perhaps should have been self-evident. It was several months before I understood this apparent contradiction—that is, how an archaeological deposit could lack an archaeological context? Eventually, I deduced that this was the situation where a site showed no indication of containing archaeological deposits having distinctive artifacts demonstrative of cultural affiliation or temporal standing.

I'm sure that this is only one experience that stimulated my interest in sites that are somewhat ephemeral, such as sites known today as flake scatters, which I consider to be contemporary equivalents to Heizer's sites "without archaeological context." In the early days of CRM, and I suspect even today, such sites were often written off as having very little importance. Back in 1988, the Office of Historic Preservation, responding to problems workers often had with flake scatters, sponsored the development of an approach to assist in determining whether a flake scatter should be evaluated for National Register eligibility. Rob Jackson, Mike Boynton, Bill Olsen, and Rich Weaver prepared a document sometimes known as CARIDAP ("California Archaeological Resource Identification and Data Acquisition Program") (Jackson et al. 1988). The program required testing of such sites to determine whether formal artifacts, cultural features, or (importantly) obsidian materials were present, as such items would put the sites into a different category of treatment. This document was important at the time, and an important sign

that archaeology in California had gone at least a bit beyond the "lack of archaeological context" to which Heizer introduced me.

Because of the abundance of flake scatters in the North Coast Ranges, my colleagues, students and I often studied them, often finding little except flakes, leaving me at times wondering if perhaps Heizer was right. However, after too many failures, I came to believe that it was a methodological failure of our own.

CONTRASTING ASSEMBLAGES OF TRAVELERS AND PROCESSORS

One of my major interests 40 years ago was the emergence of the tribelet, although the downside was that I lacked a clear theoretical perspective to guide me. Instead I developed my methodological bias attempting simply to perceive the differences between earlier and later sites and site components. There were differences, some of which seemed to hint at directional change, at times toward greater socio-cultural complexity and at other times toward less complexity. Simple examples of such hints were the occurrence of locally made beads, often with relatively great variability of material and style, that over time were eventually outnumbered or replaced by imported marine shell beads of uniform styles. In other contexts, shell beads of uniform styles were replaced with what Bennyhoff (1967 p.c.) suggested were likely to have been locally made beads, less finished than earlier beads (e.g., punched holes replacing drilled holes). Bennyhoff (1967 p.c.) suggested that this change was due to a break-up of previously established trade networks (see also Bennyhoff and Hughes 1984).¹

In the early 1960s, I observed some patterns that are commonly noted today—for example, a shift from the use of imported, ready-made obsidian projectile points with little debitage (and that of the small size suggestive of repair or sharpening), to the use of locally manufactured points, accompanied by a much more variable debitage pattern suggesting local manufacture. At that time I was apparently one of the few California archaeologists who systematically collected debitage from sites I excavated. Also during the early 1960s, and reinforced over time elsewhere, I noted, again a relatively common observation today, that some sites contained many points of relatively few types,

almost always of the same material, while other sites had relatively few points with a variety of styles, and often with a high proportion of non-local materials, with the two modes often accompanied by parallel differences in debitage patterns. Inferentially, these two modes seemed to be the product of two different exchange patterns. One appeared to be regularized, perhaps even centrally administered. This pattern seemed to contrast with the other, which seemed more like a person-to-person transaction, possibly ad hoc in nature. Such observations increased my interest in the differences in two contrasting socio-cultural systems: in today's terms, the travelers and the processors.

REFLECTIONS ON METHODS

I do believe that we still have more potential to improve our methods, to develop even more knowledge about materials in the ground and the nature of cultural information that these materials have the potential to provide, such as that reported by Wohlgenuth (1998, see also 1996). The wide range of information that obsidian can now provide is an example of this kind of development. The work of many, such as Tom Jackson, Tom Origer, Richard Hughes, Rob Jackson, and Kim Tremaine (and many others), has allowed delineation of social boundaries, refined our ability to determine contemporaneity, defined at least some patterns of inter-group relations, and given us even more precise control over the timing of cultural change.

Obviously, methods of sampling for excavation and analysis have continued to develop. I think of what up north were once referred to as STUs (Surface/Shallow Transect Units) (Hildebrandt and Hayes 1983), which were an outgrowth of earlier work of Tom Origer (Origer and Fredrickson 1980) and Greg White (1984). The STUs showed dramatic results through the work of Bill Hildebrandt (Hildebrandt and Hayes 1983), where their use was integrated with settlement-location modeling. Also the growing integration of soil geology with archaeological excavation, as implemented by Jack Meyer (1996) and others, is continuing to prove productive in the modeling of settlement locations.

Also, after many failures, we are well along in our understanding of traveler residues, and we are beginning to see evidence of interaction between

travelers and processors, through the work, for example, of Greg White (2000) at Anderson Flat in Lake County, and Kathy Dowdall (1995) on the central Sonoma County coast. I suspect that if we paid more attention to the modeling of early traveler behavior, as Bettinger (1991) has done, we would not only gain more information about a lifeway strategy, buried deep in prehistory, but also understand its more recent manifestations, as the diversified transition to processor proceeded.

MODELING BEHAVIOR

I think of discussions I had with Bill Hildebrandt during the Pilot Ridge project in the early 1980s about a high-elevation ridge site that at the time seemed somewhat unique, in that projectile points of the Central Valley were intermixed with points from northwestern California. This should remind us that even travelers interacted with one another. If Randy Milliken (1983) was correct, there may have been a relatively large number of families who interacted in order to find appropriate marriage mates for the children. There was also a need for sharing information about projected itineraries (to decrease the extent of direct competition for resources) and to obtain the views of others about projected climatic conditions and resource distributions. I would hope that careful modeling could generate types of alternative locations where multiple families could meet more or less regularly and in addition even model the nature of archaeological residues that might be present. When we consider that a traveler adaptation dominated the past in California for perhaps 9,000 years or more, it seems that there would be great intellectual rewards as we increase our understanding of that lifeway as it appears in the ground increases. The traveler lifeway never disappeared, but was maintained (or reinvented) in different ways in different regions and is reflected in our ethnographic knowledge in many districts throughout the state.

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(Endnotes)

¹ As I gained more experience, I found that I preferred the term exchange over the term trade. Exchange to me, implied the movement of goods and ideas between people for all kinds of reasons, in many different contexts, from what may appear to have been simple gift giving to centrally administered trading ventures.