

EL VALLECITO: A PREHISTORIC SITE IN BAJA CALIFORNIA

FERNANDO OVIEDO GARCÍA

Translated from Spanish by Don Laylander

In 2001, archaeological investigations were reinitiated at the site of El Vallecito. The aim is to obtain information on the way of life and customs of its former settlers, the Kumeyaay. The strategy ranges from surface survey to excavation and analysis of the obtained materials. Up to the present, the areas of major occupation have been defined and the raw materials utilized have been identified. The practice of cremation has been demonstrated, and the zones where this practice was performed have been identified. In addition, the animal species that the local inhabitants were using have been identified, and chronometric dating has placed the site in what is known as late prehistory.

El Vallecito is a site known primarily for its rock paintings, of which there is a considerable number within a relatively small area. Apart from this characteristic, which is so striking and spectacular for the public in general, El Vallecito offers material evidence for archaeological investigation that speaks to us of the place as an important temporary settlement of the ancient Kumeyaay natives, semi-nomadic bands of collectors and hunters in northwest Baja California.

The present paper has as its objective to make known the advances that were made during the 2001 and 2002 seasons of investigation at El Vallecito (Oviedo García 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b).

The location is considered to have been a temporary encampment for semi-nomadic groups. These people occupied the location periodically at the end of summer in order to acquire natural resources such as pinyon nuts and acorns that mature at that time and also in order to carry out activities of a social nature when different bands came together. These bands left important material evidence of their passage through the location, such as the various images painted in rockshelters, bedrock metates and mortars, ancient hearths, lithic artifacts, and some fragments of pottery.

The location was occupied since at least 1,000 years ago by the Kumeyaay. This group had an ample knowledge of the territory, and they obtained their subsistence from the resources of the natural environment, knowing well the seasons for the maturation of plants and the reproduction of animal species. They were essentially collectors of wild products, as well as hunters and fishermen. They had temporary settlements within a large territory encompassing the coast, the mountains, and the desert.

During the summer they traveled to the high portions of the sierra, and in the winter they went down to the Pacific coast or the desert. Originally they lived in the northwest part of the state of Baja California and in southern California, from the Pacific Ocean to Imperial Valley and from San Diego county in the U.S. to the limits of Paipai territory at San Vicente and Santa Catarina in Baja California.

STUDY AREA

El Vallecito is located 6 km from the town of La Rumorosa, within the *municipio* of Tecate, in the extreme north of Baja California, close to the international frontier between Mexico and the U. S. It is situated on the western slope of the Sierra Juárez, at an elevation of 1,300 m.

The site occupies an open area within the mountain range formed by rocky granitic outcrops and two small hills that run from north to south, one to the east and the other to the west of the site. Those two elevated areas protect it from the wind and make it seem intentionally sheltered. Extending between the hills is the area that holds material evidence of major occupation by the groups that settled at what is now the site.

The location currently encompasses 160 ha. It has a climate varying from dry Mediterranean temperate to sub-humid temperate, a rainy season primarily in the winter with sporadic snowfall, and hot summers. The vegetation is chaparral or low brush, within which chamise, juniper, and scrub oak predominate; we also see remnant forests of pinyon pine. The animal species we commonly find are small mammals such as woodrats, squirrels, rabbits, and hares. Also present are

rattlesnakes and some birds, and larger mammals such as deer, foxes, and mountain lions are occasionally seen.

WORK COMPLETED

The activities that have been carried out consist basically of office studies and fieldwork. The first phase involved looking for existing bibliographical information concerning the site. Fieldwork was the second phase, consisting of a reconnaissance throughout the area that was both intensive and extensive, and excavations at specific locations near the rockshelters containing pictographs or at concentrations of surface material. As a third phase, an analysis was performed on the materials collected during the fieldwork; these consisted primarily of lithic items, but also included some potsherds, faunal and floral remains, and human bone, among other things.

RESULTS

The reconnaissance documented that El Vallecito had been occupied for the favorable terrain conditions it presents. A relatively flat space is surrounded by large rock outcrops that provided shelter and places to carry out diverse activities, both domestic or everyday ones and others of a magico-religious or symbolic character, as seen in the varied images painted on the rocks.

The cultural materials resulting from activities at the site are concentrated close to the outcrops that have paintings, and to a lesser degree near outcrops that lack this characteristic. Cultural activity occurred in rockshelters located in the center of the site that had sizes and shapes suitable to be used for habitation. All activities were carried out at these places. Cultural material is concentrated primarily in the rockshelters known as "Los Solecitos" and "La Cueva del Indio," as well as at an isolated outcrop located in the extreme northeast of the site and in the open area on the southwest side that is now used for camping.

Excavations were conducted primarily near the outcrops with pictographs, as well as at locations with considerable amounts of remains on the surface. During the 2001 season, six units were excavated, and in the 2002 season, there were only three.

With regard to the analysis of cultural material, we need to strongly emphasize the lithics, amounting to more than 70 percent of the collection. These were distantly followed by ceramics, with a little more than 15 percent; non-human bone and shell, with a little more than 5 percent; modern fragments, with 2 percent; and human bone, with less than .05 percent; along with

some other scarce materials. The lithics were primarily flaked items, with a small number of pieces of groundstone. We mainly found projectile points, knives, and scrapers, as well as a considerable number of manufacturing waste products such as cores, flakes, and microflakes. As to artifacts related to milling activities, there are manos, polishing stones, metates, and mortars.

Ceramics were scarce. Smoothed, plain types predominated, although some plain specimens were found with incised decorations, and some sherds were painted with red stripes.

CONCLUSIONS

Fieldwork has demonstrated that El Vallecito was a seasonal encampment for groups of collectors, hunters, and fishermen. These people showed a strong preference for processing foods by means of bedrock metates and mortars.

The occupation of the site was generally concentrated near rockshelters with pictographs, and less commonly near rockshelters that lack pictographs. The shelters are located primarily in the center of the site and have sizes and shapes suitable for habitation. In these places there are bedrock metates and mortars, which are also frequently in the shelters having pictographs.

The site's rocky outcrops were used as sheltered areas, both for magico-religious activities (creating rock art) and for carrying out domestic activities or living daily life (grinding seeds, preparing food).

Lithic tools were made primarily from local raw materials. Among the items we recovered are projectile points, scrapers, cores, and flakes. Exotic materials were used for cutting edges, as in the case of the obsidian from which they made projectile points and of which we also found lithic wastes.

The pieces of pottery are primarily plain, although there are painted sherds (red on the natural background color of the clay) and sherds decorated with incised lines. The vessels were for domestic use, and their shapes are generally globular.

A zooarchaeological study of the recovered faunal material has been conducted. A food preference was found for small mammals, such as rabbits, hares, squirrels, and woodrats, but one large mammal, the black-tailed deer, was also consumed (Guía Ramírez 2002, 2003).

Human cremation was practiced at El Vallecito, where remains of human bone that had been exposed to fire have been found.

In the archaeology of Baja California, this site is placed chronologically at the end of the late prehistoric period, which began around 1,500 years ago and ended with the arrival of Europeans (Bendímez 1989:17; Laylander 1999:43).

El Vallecito is a site where intensive activity occurred. During the fieldwork, numerous and diverse cultural remains were recovered. Interdisciplinary studies are needed to obtain the perspectives of different specialists concerning particular aspects of the site.

2003b Proyecto arqueológico El Vallecito y La Rumorosa, B.C.: investigaciones recientes, temporada 2001. In *III Encuentro Binacional "Antropología e Historia de Baja California" 2002*, compact disk. Centro INAH Baja California, Mexicali, Mexico.

.....

REFERENCES CITED

- Bendímez Patterson, Julia
1989 Antecedentes históricos de los indígenas de Baja California. *Estudios Fronterizos* 5:11-26.
- Guía-Ramírez, Andrea
2002 *Análisis de los materiales arqueozoológicos provenientes del sitio arqueológico "El Vallecito," temporada 2001*. On file, Centro INAH Baja California, Ensenada, Mexico.
2003 *Análisis arqueozoológico del sitio arqueológico El Vallecito, temporada 2002*. On file, Centro INAH Baja California, Ensenada, Mexico.
- Laylander, Don
1999 Una exploración de las adaptaciones culturales prehistóricas en Baja California. In *Antología de la arqueología de Baja California*, edited by Julia Bendímez Patterson, pp. 41-45. Centro INAH Baja California, Mexicali, Mexico.
- Oviedo García, Fernando
2002a *Informe del proyecto arqueológico El Vallecito, La Rumorosa, B.C., temporada 2001*. Submitted to the INAH Archaeological Council, Mexico City.
2002b Hacia un mejor conocimiento de El Vallecito. *Revista Camino Real Misionero* 2-3:58-59.
2003a *Informe del proyecto arqueológico El Vallecito, La Rumorosa, B.C., temporada 2002*. Submitted to the INAH Archaeological Council, Mexico City.