

Malcolm Rogers: Ancient Trails and Rock Features

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Abstract

Well known for his many archaeological contributions, Malcolm Rogers was also a pioneer in recognizing the importance of prehistoric trails in the California desert. In environments that seldom supported long-term habitation, Rogers saw these footpaths of the past as “an impressive phenomenon.” Not content with simply recording the ancient trails, Rogers saw them, along with their associated shrines and rock features, as a means for interpreting human behavior. This paper briefly touches on Rogers’ work and how it benefits modern researchers.

Introduction

Malcolm Rogers surveyed hundreds of miles of prehistoric trails at a time when many archaeologists in the West were focused on grander pursuits. For example, in the 1930s Harold Gladwin and Emil Haury were excavating Snaketown (e.g., Gladwin 1937; Gladwin et al. 1937), and Mark Harrington (1933) was excavating Gypsum Cave.

Most modern researchers, if they are familiar with Rogers’ work regarding prehistoric trails and associated rock features, are acquainted with them through his 1939 and 1945 publications or even the posthumous volume, *Ancient Hunters of the Far West* (Rogers 1966). Those focusing on the deserts in eastern California and western Arizona may also know of contributions in McGuire and Schiffer’s (1982) *Hohokam and Patayan*, including discussions in “Summaries of Previous Field Research Projects” (McGuire 1982:439–440), “Trails Shrines at Site SDM C-1” (Waters 1982a), and “Ceramic Data from Lowland

Patayan Sites” (Waters 1982b:572–573), which contains a map of Rogers’ sites and trails.

In spite of the fundamental nature of trails, substantive treatments of these features are surprisingly rare in the anthropological literature. Of the archaeologists involved in studying travel, many are now focused on these features within the larger landscape (see Snead et al. 2009).

Rogers’ Trails Research

Ahead of his time, Rogers recognized the rare opportunity to approach the deserts in the Southwest and particularly eastern California as landscapes reflecting former human activity linked through an extensive system of trails (Figure 1). Not content with simply recording the ancient trails, Rogers saw them, along with their associated shrines and rock features, as a means for interpreting human behavior. As an example, Rogers thought that the phenomenon of parallel trails of different ages was due to later people preferring not to walk in the path of those who were dead. Sometimes he also found where trails crossed that a line of rocks was present as if to prevent the spirits of the dead from traveling any farther (Rogers 1966:14).

This landscape approach to trails is echoed in a recent volume, *Landscapes of Movement* (Snead et al. 2009), which is based on the premise that trails are manifestations of human movement through the landscape



Figure 1. Malcolm Rogers collecting artifacts along Trail C-86 in Imperial County. Copyright San Diego Museum of Man

and are key to an understanding of human behavior. Rogers also saw them, along with their associated artifacts, shrines, and rock features, as a part of a larger landscape.

The arid desert regions in eastern California provide an environment where evidence of prehistoric travel routes is relatively well preserved. Rogers focused much of his work on trails in the Mojave and Colorado deserts, and his research is documented in notes and photographs housed at the San Diego Museum of Man. These offer dedicated researchers access to portions of the archaeological record as it was still preserved in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

What did Rogers contribute through his trail investigations? As Becker and Altschul (2003) pointed out, the work of Rogers (1939, 1966) is one of the earliest and best archaeological studies of desert trails. Rogers followed a number of trails across Pleistocene terraces and placed them into a chronological framework based on the age of the landforms they crossed, the degree of patination, and the ages of associated artifacts.

Rogers also conducted work at Lake Cahuilla, or the Blake Sea, as it was then commonly known. His work along the recessional beaches was a key component of his Yuman ceramic chronological seriation and reconstruction of Yuman prehistory. He traced the distribution of ceramic types and other artifacts along the lake's recessional terraces. He reasoned that successively later archaeological material should be concentrated at lower elevations, meaning that later terrace sites and only the most recent ceramic types could occur on the final lake bed. Rogers cross-checked his seriation results with his excavations and what he described as horizontal trail stratigraphy. Horizontal trail stratigraphy was a process in which sherds from trail segments isolated by erosional cuts were compared with sherds from trail segments that had been isolated at geologically earlier or later times. As Hanna (1982:406) noted, Rogers' geological training was a key element in his development of his concept of horizontal stratigraphy. Using the concept of horizontal stratigraphy, Rogers (1939, 1945, 1966) was able to provide relative dates for trails by observing the landforms they crossed. Trails crossing only old surfaces were considered older than those

crossing surfaces of various ages. In his seminal study *Waters* (1982c:276) cited Rogers' work with horizontal trail stratigraphy, stating that "treating the trails and their associated pottery types like vertical strata, Rogers was able to establish a ceramic sequence."

Regarding the function of the trails, Rogers stated that they were used for seasonal travel, war, and visiting (Rogers 1945:181). He felt that the longest trails extended east into the Hohokam region and the shortest ones went southeast toward Sonora (Rogers 1945:185). Trails documented by Rogers include the Mojave Trail, Chuckwalla Trail, Black Mesa Trail, Cargo Muchacho Trail, Midway Pass Trail (Figure 2), and many others.

In a two-page manuscript, Rogers offered a brief summary of fieldwork he conducted in 1931:

No work was undertaken in San Bernardino County, but the survey of Imperial County was completed; and a strip of territory in southern Riverside County, two townships wide, extending from Coachella Valley to the Colorado River was thoroughly investigated

before our activities for the season were brought to a close.

Our reconnaissance consisted of locating, mapping, photographing and recording archaeological sites, as well as making collections of all ethnological material encountered. Beside investigating aboriginal camp and village-sites, special efforts were made to locate and record the petroglyphs of the region which often occur apart and at some distance from encampments. In conjunction with the work, a study of ancient Indian trails, which are so numerous and well exemplified in the California desert, was made [Rogers 1931:1-2].

Rogers' trail investigations were also chronicled in an unpublished 1933 manuscript in which he commented on following out a trail he first found in 1931: "This trail, which starts on the west bank of the Colorado River at Palo Verde ... was traced in a westerly direction for 80 miles to the head of the Coachella Valley" (Rogers 1933:1). Rogers called it the "Chuckwalla Trail," although this may be the Coco-Maricopa Trail



Figure 2. Midway Pass Trail in Imperial County. Copyright San Diego Museum of Man.

(CA-RIV-53T), which later would be recorded by Francis and Patricia Johnston (1954, 1957) and studied by McCarthy (1982). In following this trail, Rogers noted that his travel was made easier because the trail was paralleled by an abandoned stage road. His comment reinforces the anecdotal claim that historic period routes followed earlier aboriginal alignments.

Trail Shrines

As Hanna (1982:223) observed, this Chuckwalla Trail investigation was pivotal since Rogers found the “key site” that he had been looking for. It was along this trail that Rogers found 19 trail shrines. The features were described as occurring

... within a few feet of the trail and on either side of it with no regularity as to spacing. They vary considerably in size but not much as to contents, being composed of local rock, dirt, potsherds, stone and shell artifacts, bone tools and burnt food bones, in descending proportions in the order named [Rogers 1933:2].

Based on the materials and shrines associated with the Chuckwalla Trail, Rogers ascertained that the trail was of Yuman origin and served several purposes. According to his analysis, it provided a means of contact between the lower Colorado River Valley and the settlements on the shore of Lake Cahuilla, was a migratory path, and was a travel route for hunting parties. Rogers (1933:4) also described the trail as being utilized by trading parties, based on the Pacific Coast shell artifacts he found in the shrines. From the diversity of ceramics he observed, Rogers also felt that the trail had been used for many centuries.

While Rogers explored a number of the shrines, he left others undisturbed for “future reference.” However, he added a melancholy note that it would probably be only a matter of time before the shrines would be destroyed by relic hunters (Rogers 1933:3).

In “An Outline of Yuman Prehistory,” Rogers (1945:181) commented that trail shrines were commonly built at mid-points of the trails. These features were composed of small stones, artifacts consisting largely of broken pottery, and dirt. Sizes varied, but some were quite large (i.e., with a mass of several tons). Rogers speculated that the trail shrines were built by travelers in the belief that the offerings would prevent fatigue or injury during the trek (Rogers 1966:51).

Although only a qualitative assessment, Rogers also used artifact association and condition to support his chronology for the trails. He identified several trails that he characterized as older San Dieguito trails. The older trails could be identified by their faintness and desert varnish. They also never went to modern water sources, seldom paralleled the later trails, and did not have pottery associated with them (Rogers ca. 1920s).

Opinionated and a perfectionist, Rogers was willing to reconsider some of his earlier findings after his study of the Chuckwalla Trail. Based on this later work, Rogers (1933:4) stated that he believed that in 1926 he had mistaken disturbed trail shrines for house sites along the Black Mesa Trail, a major trail leading south from Palo Verde.

Despite such occasional lapses, for those intending to use Rogers’ data for analysis, an encouraging test of his notes occurred with a project in eastern Imperial County. The accuracy of Rogers’ documentation in this area was verified in the Indian Pass area, where it was included in an analysis conducted for a proposed mining operation. Site C-70 (Figure 3), now part of CA-IMP-2727, was originally recorded by Rogers in the 1920s, although he appears to have revisited the area later. During fieldwork for the mining project (Pigniolo et al. 1997), it was possible to relocate where the Black Mesa (CA-IMP-5359) and Mojave (CA-IMP-5360) trails crossed, as well as a rock alignment (Figure 4) and two shrines.



Figure 3. Trail C-70 near Indian Pass in Imperial County. Copyright San Diego Museum of Man.



Figure 4. Rogers' Feature A near the intersection of Black Mesa Trail and Mojave Trail in Imperial County. Copyright San Diego Museum of Man.

Conclusion

The contributions of Rogers' trail studies are multifaceted. For those interested in studying trails, Rogers' work provides a rare glimpse into past landscapes. But for those who have continued to work in the deserts of Arizona and California, a major contribution of Rog-

ers' trails investigations was the foundation it provided for his conceptual contributions to prehistory.

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