ROCK ROOMS, STACKS and GRANARY BASES: THE STONE ARCHITECTURE OF WESTWOOD VALLEY[1]

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ABSTRACT

The rock complexes and other rock features located within the Westwood Valley in western San Diego County were recorded and excavated during fieldwork conducted in 1985-86. A complex consisting of 16 interconnecting rooms built within a large bedrock outcrop, with stone features including granary bases and rock walls were located along a large seasonal drainage. Eight of the 16 rock rooms were excavated; the others will be preserved in open space. Carbon-14 dates and diagnostic artifacts place occupation and use of the rooms within the Late Prehistoric/Contact Period circa A.D. 1500-1800.

It is suggested that stone architecture among the Late Prehistoric peoples of San Diego County is far more common than previously reported and that in the foothills and mountains, stone works may be a significant cultural element.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of architecture among the Late Prehistoric peoples of San Diego County has been overlooked in the admittedly sparse ethnographic record and poorly documented in the archaeological data base. To a large degree, this lack of documentation is because ethnographers were dealing with cultures that were in transition and had adapted to European styles of storage and housing.

The paucity of data in the archaeological record is a function of surveys that have focused on recording non-architectural items, excavations that have been conducted using random sampling to recover "data sets" consisting of artifact assemblages and, in some cases, failure of field investigators to discriminate between natural rock features and cultural modification. The presence of clearly defined rock features within a large, Late Prehistoric settlement in Westwood Valley, near Rancho Bernardo, California, offered an opportunity to better define and describe the architectural efforts of one cultural group.

NOMENCLATURE

As with other attributes of a culture, stone architecture can be categorized into functional types or classes. While

still tentative, the following basic nomenclature for architectural stone features at Westwood, and for San Diego County generally, follows similar definitions in use in the Southwest:

Granary Bases: Because of an heightened awareness as to their presence, there has been an increase in the recondition of these features. These circular features are usually one tier and no more than two tiers in height. They vary in size from less than 1 m in diameter to as large as 2 m. Invariably they are situated on flat bedrock outcrops, often, although not always, near milling features. Artifacts are rare except as they are associated with adjacent features.

Documentation of granary bases is far more limited than for dwellings or enclosures. Most of the existing data are inferential. A variety of sources note that the Luiseño, Cahuilla and Diegueño manufactured large willow granary baskets with a capacity of eight to twelve bushels for the storage of acorns and food stuffs (Kroeber 1925:699, 828; Sparkman 1908:211).

These containers, which measure three to six feet in diameter, are reported to be placed flat on the ground or on some type of platform. Most often the platform is described as a wooden scaffold although references are given to storage atop rocks, in piles of rocks or upon rock rings supporting the basket with a large flat rock serving to cap the basket mouth (Spier 1923:335; Sparkman 1908:211). The single-tiered stone circles at Westwood are situated on flat bedrock outcrops, have diameters consistent with the dimensions of willow granaries and are conveniently located adjacent to milling features. Similar features have been recorded throughout the foothills and mountains of San Diego County (Phillips and Carrico 1986).

Diversion Walls: Amongst the agricultural people of the Southwest, diversion walls and check dams are well-documented. For the hunter and gatherers of San Diego County, the underlying assumption seems to have been made that since agriculture was problematic at best, rock walls on Indian sites must be of contact/historic origin, possibly even of European manufacture.

These features are formed in a linear pattern and are often curvilinear. The matrix stones are not faced and only rudimentary chinking is used. These walls are usually more than two tiers in height and have been recorded as high as five tiers. Length varies from short walls (1.5 m) to extensive works (5 m). Typically, they extend upslope from stream or creek terraces and are rarely associated with artifacts.

No ethnohistoric or ethnological record could be found for local native construction of diversion walls or non-dwelling walls. It may be that walls on Indian sites in San Diego County, including the four recorded at Westwood, represent post-contact adaptation or construction by non-Indian settlers. It is also possible that the walls are yet another undocumented aspect of native culture.

Stacks/Monuments: In the desert regions of California and Arizona piles or stacks of rocks are routinely discovered and recorded as trail shrines or monuments. In interior San Diego County they are often assigned to the historic period and assumed to be survey markers. While not every rock pile is of Native American or prehistoric origin, many may have been. Typically, these stacks consist of a single phallic-like rock measuring less than 1 m and supported by smaller stones or a grouping of medium sized stones that collectively comprise a stack. They often rest on bedrock outcrops, frequently on the high point of a hill or slope.

Trail shrines and monument building have been documented for the Yuman and Shoshonean people of the region. Sparkman (1908:199) reported that the Luiseño erected a stone wherever a mountain lion or bear was killed. And Dubois (1908) noted that stacks of stones often had religious or supernatural importance for native peoples. The five recorded stacks or shrines at Westwood are all located on high hills and consist of clusters of rocks stacked to form a pile. Ironically, one of these stacks has been retro-fitted by land surveyors to serve as a stake line marker.

Rooms: Although the presence of rock rooms and enclosures have been increasingly reported by several researchers, Oxendine (1981), Carrico and Taylor (1982) Carrico and Cooley (1986) they have commonly been described in the literature (May 1975; Minor 1975) as defensive structures or storage areas. These enclosures are stacked or tiered rocks arranged in such a manner to form a circle or crescent (Figures 1 and 2) with more definition and capacity than features assumed to be the typical hunting blinds of Baja California and the Great Basin (Ritter 1977, 1981). The features are rarely more than three tiers in height and vary in size from relatively small (2 m diameter) to large (4 m diameter). At least 28 known sites in San Diego County are reported to have rock rooms or enclosures.

These structures are most often built into bedrock formations or outcrops although their bases are frequently sunk into A Horizon soils. Excavation within these features often produce artifacts and refuse clearly associated with habitation including formalized tools, faunal remains and ornamentation. At Westwood the 21 features identified as rooms or enclosures contained a majority of the projectile points, several types of milling tools and ceramic sherds.

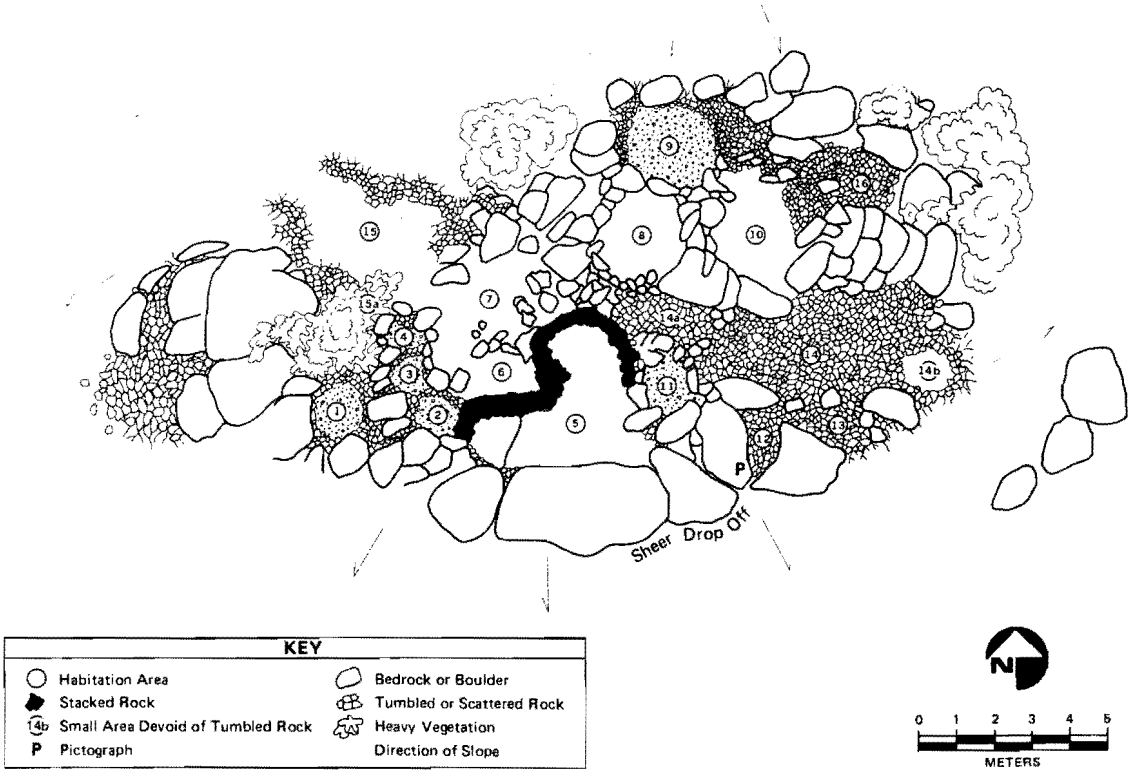

Figure 1. SDi-5938 Locus 1 - map of Feature G, before excavation.

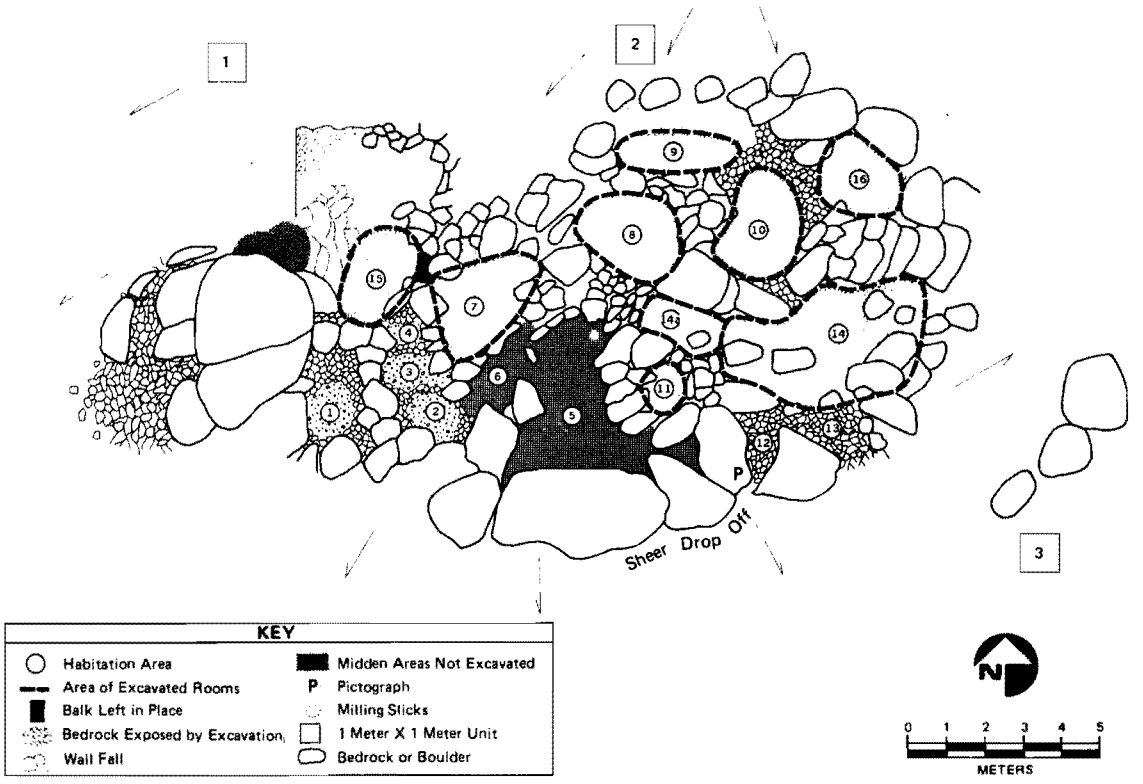

Figure 2. SDi-5938 Locus 1 - map of Feature G, after excavation.

Because of their apparent use as domiciles, or at least for a variety of domestic uses, their function as hunting blinds seems highly unlikely.

The ethnographic and ethnohistoric record for stone rooms among the Luiseño and the Ipai/Tipai is instructive if not compelling. In his 1739 report, Miguel Venegas (1943:80) noted that several groups in Baja California lived in houses that "are simply a small enclosure with stone laid upon one another, half a yard high, a yard square, and without any ceiling but the heavens...[author's translation]." While travelling through northern Baja California in 1791-92 Jose Longinos Martinez (Simpson 1961:835) similarly recorded that the dwellings of the natives "are nothing but small enclosures of stones placed one upon another without clay or mortar of any kind, being hardly more than shelters of branches."

Ethnographically, Constance Dubois cited Venegas when she described Diegueño stone enclosures on Spring Hill in Ballena Valley near Ramona, less than ten miles east of Westwood. Her description (Dubois 1908:169) of the features reported that "Upon first examination it seemed that these circles had been the foundations of Indian houses, though of material the superstructure had been made it was impossible to conjecture." In his description of the native tribes of Lower California, Arthur North (1908) also noted that the natives built stone enclosures for dwellings. Homer Aschmann (1959:110) provides more detail for the Peninsular Yuman when he noted that:

> The most common shelters were crescent-shaped windbreaks made of piles of brush or rock. Sometimes a shallow pit one or two feet deep was dug, either in the open or behind one of the windbreaks. A typical diameter was six feet, with the sheltering wall three feet high at the center and sloping down at the points of the crescent. The shelters were designed to accommodate a single family.

P.G. Gates (1909:323) quoted a Yuman-speaking Mission Indian informant near Salton Sea as relating that the ancient ones of his people had built stone houses in the mountains to the west. Throughout the desert and the foothills, Malcolm Rogers reported stone enclosures that he clearly categorized separately from the ubiquitous fish traps of the Salton Sink. Rogers noted that these tiered enclosures contained charcoal, fishbone and potsherds and that they had once served as dwellings.

In configuration, size, method of construction, and ethnic affinity, the descriptions above would seem to indicate that the Yuman and Shoshonean people of southern California generally, and San Diego County specifically, built and occupied stone enclosures. While the more typical, and more widely reported, brush and tule ramadas and domed structures may have been more common, it is clear that when the stones are available, such as at Westwood, and throughout the interior of the County, these prehistoric peoples practiced basic masonry as a cultural trait.

CONCLUSION

Since Minor's (1975) preliminary article on stone features appeared over a decade ago, the presence and importance of stone architecture in San Diego County has been increasingly documented. As the field work at Westwood clearly indicates, stone rooms, walls, granary bases and stacks were part of the Late Prehistoric cultural assemblage and reflect an architectural heritage that is still vaguely documented.

The artifact assemblage was not dominated by items reflecting only one or two specialized activities, but a variety of domestic chores. Food preparation was indicated in the lithic, faunal and ceramic assemblages. In addition, various crafts that could have taken place in these dwellings, such as the manufacture of arrows, baskets and rabbit pelt blankets were indicated. No functional differences were noted between the rooms.

Stratigraphy combined with exposed floors and wall remnants revealed variability in the shape and construction of the various enclosures and suggested they were rebuilt and altered over time. Although ethnographic literature on the construction of rock walled dwellings is lacking, records on aboriginal housing and construction conform to patterns noted in the room complex.

More significantly, the Kumeyaay and Luiseño housing possessed a pragmatic approach toward dwelling construction. House design and building technique varied according to individual, tribe, location and material available (Michelsen 1977:21; Curtis 1926:6; Lee 1925:100-108). The attitude was best summed up by Melicent Lee, who noted that each tribe of the Kumeyaay "built a slightly different house according to the location, personal prejudice and need. Consequently, one cannot describe the exact type of...house...there are variations" (Lee 1925:100-108).

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