A PERSPECTIVE ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE CALIFORNIA DESERTS: 1960 TO 1990

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ABSTRACT

A review of the changing methods and goals of archaeological research in the California Deserts between 1960 and 1990 is provided. Approaches and contributions by academic, agency, avocational, contract, military, and museum programs are discussed. Suggestions are made for the direction of future research.

INTRODUCTION

The investigation into the prehistory of the California Deserts has a long and rich history. Major developments germane to the whole of California and the West made by desert archaeologists include the definition of Pleistocene and early Holocene cultures, the western extension of Southwestern cultures, questions of the development of agriculture, and many others. The deserts of California have provided, and continue to offer, a fertile base for anthropological research.

Over the decades, however, the methods and goals of research in the deserts have changed. This is due in part to an increasing sophistication of the discipline, to a rise in the awareness of research potential, and to a change in public attitude as reflected in legislation. These trends are discussed below.

THE PRE-1960s RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

Much of the archaeological research conducted in the California Deserts prior to the 1960s was the result of the efforts of a relatively few individuals, with no or only moderate financial backing. Notable among these people were Elizabeth Crozier Campbell and Malcolm Rogers, whose work (e.g., Rogers 1929, 1939; Campbell and Campbell 1935; Campbell et al. 1937) set the groundwork for the early cultural chronology of the desert. Such people truly were pioneers, building baseline data and hypothesizing about the existence, origin, and development of various archaeological cultures. Many of these ideas often have stood the test of time and still have merit.

While the early work primarily was the effort of devoted individuals, there was some support from agencies and institutions. The National Park Service (Death Valley) sponsored some work (by the Wallaces and Alice Hunt), and the China Lake Naval Weapons Center allowed work, some of which ultimately became major contributions (e.g., Davis 1978). Other parks, monuments, and military bases did little to foster archaeological work.

The University of California (both Los Angeles and Berkeley) sponsored expeditions into the deserts. Berkeley students and staff conducted general inventory work and investigations at several major sites, including Rustler Rockshelter (Davis 1962) and Mitchell Caverns (see Pinto 1989). Personnel from UCLA (in the early 1960s) conducted a number of small excavations and

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surveys and made significant contributions to desert prehistory (e.g., Donnan 1964).

Through the Southwest Museum, M.R. Harrington made several major contributions to the archaeology of the deserts. His work at Gypsum Cave (Harrington 1933), the Stahl Site (Harrington 1957), and Tule Springs (Harrington and Simpson 1961) were important. In addition, the contributions of the San Diego Museum of Man (primarily through Malcolm Rogers) were substantial.

Other organizations, including the Archaeological Survey Association (ASA; see Steele 1982) and the San Bernardino County Museum (SBCM), conducted research efforts in the deserts prior to (and continuing past) 1960. While sometimes lacking rigor or direction, they nonetheless made significant contributions to our knowledge of the desert.

It seems that the majority of the effort made in the California Deserts prior to 1960 was centered discovering and defining "Early Man". Toward that goal, considerable progress was made. Other work was conducted on California/Southwest relationships, late prehistory, trade, etc., and major efforts were made to delineate the cultural chronology of the deserts (e.g., Rogers 1945; Wallace 1962).

THE 1960s

The 1960s witnessed, basically, a continuation of the same research goals and efforts of the previous few decades. Nothing major changed from the previous decades, either in method or goal. The reasons for this are unknown. The advent of the "New Archaeology" in the early 1960s had no real impact on desert archaeology during that decade.

THE 1970s AND 1980s

The orientation of the work taking place in the deserts changed fairly radically beginning in the early 1970s as the impact of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 1969), the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA, 1970), and their associated rules and regulations began to be felt. Federal agencies began to hire staff archaeologists to conduct the cultural resource management (CRM) studies mandated by the new laws.

The Bureau of Land Management took the lead in moving in this direction, creating the Desert District, staffing it with archaeologists, and producing the Desert Plan. Whatever its weaknesses, the Plan resulted in a great deal of archaeological work being done, including baseline inventory and the identification of important sites and regions. The military bases slowly followed suit, but the National Park Service lagged behind.

As development increased in the desert, so did the number of archaeological projects. Most were project-specific, and few overall research plans or goals are apparent (those that do exist are related to specific areas, e.g., military bases). Many of the archaeologists who had conducted research in the desert (what few there were) now became involved in the CRM process, further decreasing the amount of pure research being conducted. The typical archaeologist either worked for the government or for a CRM firm. Even graduate student projects became enmeshed with agency needs (e.g., the Afton Canyon project [Schneider 1989] and the California State University Desert Studies Consortium work at Soda Springs).

All of this necessitated the development of research designs tailored to particular locations rather than to problems, in effect limiting research. This change in emphasis signaled what might be called a paradigm shift: The primary goal was transformed from research to management, and the archaeologists (both government and private) involved increasingly became managers rather than archaeologists pursuing an understanding of prehistory.

This is not to say that these changes have been all negative. In fact, the archaeological resource base is better known, generally better protected, and better understood (but still not well enough) than it was prior to 1960. However, research access is more limited (the agency permit process often is

difficult and most people spend their time doing CRM work rather than research).

However, some research independent of agency needs did continue. The San Bernardino County Museum conducted (and still does) research at the Calico Early Man site. Several theses and dissertations were completed on California Desert archaeology, and several schools (e.g., UNLV, UC Riverside, Cerro Coso Community College) conducted actual research at several locations. Most of this work has yet to be published.

THE 1990s SO FAR

In terms of goals, there is nothing so far in the 1990s to distinguish it from the last 2 decades. Very little pure academic research is being conducted in the deserts. There are a few students working on dissertation or thesis projects, but most are connected to agency work. The majority of work is somehow connected to environmental impact reports, either at the federal, state, or local level. This situation likely is due, at least in part, to academic funding limitations and opportunities. However, methods are improving. The applications of new analytical techniques (e.g., cation ratio dating, immunological work, etc.) are welcome contributions.

Many of the archaeologists involved in the California Deserts continue to be those employed by government agencies whose primary task is the management of cultural resources. While this responsibility is very important, much of the talent and abilities of the agency people is wasted. The archaeologists in the field are in the best position to contribute to furthering research in the region. It is regrettable that they are not doing more.

The reasons for this failure are varied. First, research is not considered a priority goal by most of the upper management of the various agencies, in spite of the potential benefit the results of such research may have in agency planning. Thus, few resources (time, money, support for meetings, etc.) are allocated to research (the "R" word). Second, the mobility of agency archaeologists is legend. Few stay in a position long enough to learn the archaeology of their area, many were trained outside of California and have little regard for the comparatively unimpressive-looking sites of the desert, and some are not concerned with research at all; it is a job rather than a profession. Last, there is a growing trend for the agencies to hire persons specifically trained in cultural resource management, rather than in archaeology. While this may result in a better manager of cultural resources (the stated agency goal), it also results in a further reduction in research-oriented archaeology at the agency level. I view these trends as quite disturbing.

The same set of criticisms apply to most of the cultural resource management companies operating in the deserts. Personnel often are poorly trained (or have too little training), they have no research interests (they are technicians), the quality of reports often is poor, special studies often are not conducted, and the time and money pressures (e.g., competition for more contracts) are such that there is little opportunity to pursue research. In addition, or for the same reasons, too few companies or individuals make the effort to introduce their data into the literature or to synthesize their results (there are important exceptions, including the annual meetings of the Society for California Archaeology and the Kelso Conference). As a result, most reports and data end up in the gray literature and thus somewhat inaccessible.

While this presentation is focused on the deserts, these criticisms also apply to California archaeology in general. There seems little effort to integrate the substantial archaeological data being generated by CRM work into the real issues of California prehistory.

THE FUTURE

If the goal of archaeology and archaeological research is to understand what happened in antiquity, both in evolution and in process, then archaeology must transcend the short-term goals of agency cultural programs. There is a great need for pure re-

search in the California Deserts, and such work must be supported by the various agencies; they stand to gain as much as anyone.

As part of this longer-range goal, there is a pressing need to involve the agency archaeologists in the research effort. There are (at least) 2 obstacles to overcome: (1) the lack of support from supervisors (e.g., the pressing work-load) and (2) the professional commitment of some of the agency archaeologists themselves. The results of CRM programs must be integrated into a more useful form than reports filed in drawers. There must be an effort at dissemination; agency archaeologists should be publishing their work, presenting their results at meetings, or at least submitting their results (site records, reports, etc.) to the clearinghouses. There is far too little of that.

The private CRM archaeologists suffer from similar problems. Time and money pressures often preclude their participation in the scientific end of archaeology. Few publish their results, but participation at meetings and the presentation of papers seems much greater than by agency personnel. It is true that CRM archaeologists currently are in poor positions to conduct research, but this must change and that change must be made by the CRM folks themselves.

Academic archaeologists are not above these same problems. They should be involving their students in research (instead of chasing CRM dollars) and not just training them for CRM careers; students graduate never knowing what pure research is. It seems that the entire academic machine is geared to put out CRM people who know something about archaeology rather than archaeologists who know something about CRM. I believe this is the wrong approach.

It is difficult to make suggestions on how to address these problems. Much of the focus of archaeology in California has shifted away from science and to management. This is not necessarily true for the discipline as a whole; perhaps it is because California has such a large demand for CRM and agency archaeology that research is put on the back-burner. Certainly, there is little academic commitment to research in California archaeology; most departments have moved away from California studies. Perhaps the answer is to just get excited about California again.

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