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Contextualizing Baja California

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EARLY EUROPEAN EXPLORERS AND MISSIONARIES who first set foot in Baja California described the peninsula as a harsh environment, filled with “savage” tribes of simplistic people (see Laylander 2000:96–100). These early explorers typically arrived in Baja California by way of Mesoamerica, and their views on the simplicity of the peninsular cultures were undoubtedly influenced by the monumental architecture, agriculture, and robust material culture of the Mesoamericans. Written accounts of these first explorations have influenced perceptions of the peninsula and its inhabitants for generations, apparently leaving many researchers to consider the region as nothing more than a vast desert, as uncomplicated in its cultural landscape as it is in its ecological landscape. The hunter-gatherer-fisher groups living in Baja California were overshadowed by their Mesoamerican neighbors and were left virtually unstudied for decades.

However, what we did know about Baja Californians suggested that they had ancient, deeply ritualistic cultures that thrived in the landscape in which they lived. Early archaeological investigation in the 1800s uncovered a fascinating “Las Palmas” burial tradition and crania with a unique morphology that garnered international anthropological interest (Diguet 1905; Rivet 1909; ten Kate 1884). Both the burial tradition and the skeletal materials are still the objects of study today (e.g., Adams 1998; Carmean and Molto 1991; Molto and Fujita 1995; Molto et. al 1997; Rosales-Lopez et al. 2007). These same early investigations also uncovered numerous rock art presentations, some massive in scope (Crosby 1984). Though theories on why cultures produce rock art vary widely, it is generally thought that it conveys messages about the social or religious organization of groups, and is considered an indicator of a more than “brutish” existence (Laylander 2006:5). These initial findings about the cultures of the Baja Californians

should have encouraged a more progressive view of the peninsula’s inhabitants; however, the idea that the “harsh” environment of the peninsula was home only to groups of primitive, uncomplicated, and isolated populations remained a dominant view among scholars for decades. This view conformed to the traditional measure of cultural complexity, which depended on the development of formal social classes, urban centers, and a recognizable political structure. By these standards, the hunter-gatherer-fisher groups of Baja California could indeed be considered uncomplicated.

Not all scholars agreed with this dominant view. The work of numerous researchers throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century seemed to challenge the paradigm that Baja California was uncomplicated in its ecological and cultural landscape. This research focused on accurately characterizing the peninsula and its prehistoric and historic inhabitants by drawing attention to Baja California cultures in their own context, free from a strict adherence to concepts of what defines complexity, and free from comparisons with their Mesoamerican neighbors (e.g., Des Lauriers 2005; Fujita and Poyatos de Paz 1998; Hyland 1997; Laylander and Moore 2006; Ritter 1979). It is in this context that we begin to see Baja California and its prehistory for what it is—a unique landscape with compelling cultures that had a sophisticated knowledge of the natural environment, complex ritual practices, a propensity for artistic expression, and far-reaching social and economic ties. This special issue of the *Journal* reflects this desire to understand Baja California and its inhabitants in its own context.

The articles that follow were originally presented at a symposium entitled “The Emerging Archaeology of Baja California: Challenging Paradigms of Isolation and Marginality” at an annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology. The symposium was developed

to disseminate data on some of the research currently being conducted in Baja California, and to directly question antiquated views on the ecology and culture of the region. The idea for the symposium was engendered by a recent volume edited by Laylander and Moore (2006), an outstanding (and much needed) synthesis of the current state of knowledge on the prehistory of Baja California. While the Laylander and Moore volume provides a broad overview of the prehistory of the peninsula, including its paleoenvironment, indigenous languages, and regional cultural histories, the goal of the papers included here is to present data on specific research projects and how they are continuing to change perceptions of Baja California.

The articles in this volume address the paradigm of isolation and marginality within the Baja California peninsula, not by viewing the region only as a home to isolated human populations struggling for existence in a marginal land, but by considering how the history and prehistory of Baja California is reflected within the context of its particular geographic, environmental, and cultural characteristics. The authors consider the Baja California peninsula in context — an important step in the process of understanding the cultural trajectory of its inhabitants.

The authors take different perspectives on the theme; some focus on the geographic isolation of the peninsula and how that isolation can be advantageous to particular types of research, while others examine the extent to which that isolation did or did not affect the cultures of the region. Indeed, the word ‘isolated’ has often been used to define Baja California cultures over the years, but the term can be misleading. Though the amount of foreign intervention may have been limited, isolation from foreign influences should not be a defining characteristic of a culture. Populations can thrive and develop their own identities and traditions apart from those seen in neighboring regions. These ‘isolated’ populations should be studied in their own context, and the authors contributing to this volume do just that. Instead of focusing on the degree of isolation from the ‘outside’ world, they determine spheres of interaction between Baja California cultures, and define how these cultures deftly navigated their own ecological and cultural landscapes.

Understanding these cultures in context can be difficult because of a lack of readily available data on

current research being conducted in Baja California. Yet both Mexican and foreign researchers working there are seeking ways to disseminate their findings to a wider audience. Antonio Porcayo’s contribution here represents one such effort, as he details results from the first extensive excavation of archaeological sites in the upper Gulf of California region. His article examines subsistence practices and exchange routes occurring during the late occupation at the El Faro site, located on the shore of the northeastern region of the peninsula. The proximity of the site to present-day Arizona and Sonora, as well as to local obsidian sources, makes it ideal for understanding the degree of interaction and trade that occurred in this region. While Porcayo argues for a certain degree of isolation due to the annual flooding of the Colorado River and to the continual warfare that occurred during later occupations in this region, he documents indications of a long-distance trade in obsidian and ceramic materials that suggest that the region did have interactions with distant regions within — and possibly outside of — the Baja California peninsula.

Another region of Baja California that has been the focus of arguments of isolation is the area between La Paz and Los Cabos, known as the Cape Region. Crania recovered from this region and dating to the middle Holocene retained a dolichocephalic morphology — a genetic trait present in earlier Paleoindian crania — long after it had disappeared from the gene pool of other North American populations (Massey 1955). Groups in the Cape Region also ‘lagged’ behind the rest of North America in adopting the bow and arrow and in discontinuing the use of the atlatl (Laylander 2007; Massey 1961). These unique physical and cultural attributes were used to argue for the extreme isolation of the Cape Region populations, and became some of their most defining characteristics.

Fujita, however, looks at the Cape Region populations in a different light, and tests the idea that Espíritu Santo Island was the nuclear core of the Cape Region. By tracing the development of some of the unique traits found in the region, she examines the influence that the populations on Espíritu Santo Island had on the surrounding areas, and possibly on distant populations within the peninsula. Instead of focusing on the isolation of the Cape Region, Fujita highlights the unique traditions that were shared among the cultures

within this area and shows how these groups developed their own identities and traditions.

Another pair of authors who focus on the Cape Region see the geographic isolation of the area as a boon to research. Gusick and Davis' article concludes that the environmental attributes of the region are ideal for investigations of underwater archaeological sites, and for conducting research on a hypothesized Pleistocene migration into the New World via a Pacific coastal route. Previous research conducted by Fujita (2002) indicates that Espíritu Santo Island was inhabited during the late Pleistocene, making this landscape an important locale for understanding early maritime culture and migration. As Gusick and Davis point out, this area of Baja California has ideal oceanographic, geologic, and geographic conditions for investigating Pleistocene landforms submerged by a eustatic sea level rise. These landforms have the potential to yield preserved cultural materials dating to a presumed Pleistocene migration into the New World. Instead of focusing on the arid environment as a hindrance, Gusick and Davis show how that environment has created a 'natural laboratory' for research (Brown and Raab 2007).

The article by Macfarlan and Henrickson presents a unique method for statistically identifying similarities and dissimilarities between Baja California groups, and for determining the relative degree of cultural isolation of each group. Cultural relationships between Baja Californian populations have been largely reconstructed from linguistic data recorded by Jesuit missionaries, yet non-linguistic traits are an important indicator of between-group relations. Macfarlan and Henrickson use content analysis to systematically organize cultural trait information from early historical accounts, Jesuit missionary documents, and academic research on three Lower California groups, the Pericú, Guaycura, and Cochimí, and on the Seri/Comcáac Indians of the Gulf of California and Sonora. Their method counters the subjectivity of historic documents, and allows them to test hypotheses on degrees of cultural isolation, rather than simply assuming its presence.

All of the articles in this volume focus on understanding Baja California cultures in context, and Panich's contribution offers a particularly intriguing view of native experiences during missionization. By utilizing concurrent archaeological and ethnohistoric research at Mission Santa

Catalina in northern Baja California, Panich examines how the mission became an important place in the indigenous landscape of the region. Typical insights into mission life depict the neophyte populations as being isolated from their traditional social and economic relationships. However, Mission Santa Catalina was founded in an area that bordered the traditional territories of native groups speaking at least four languages: Paipai, Kumeyaay, Cucapá, and Kiliwa. This convergence supplied native peoples living at the mission with ample opportunities for external connections and the development of new identities that integrated ties to their traditional social landscape with their new mission life. This new cultural landscape integrated larger social and economic groups, and the mission became an important 'nexus' for native life in the region. This view of native mission life stands in stark contrast to traditional depictions of isolated mission communities.

The articles that follow are intended to disseminate some of the data that have been slowly accumulating on Baja California and its prehistory and history. Hopefully, they will also continue to change perceptions of the peninsula and convince readers that by understanding the unique peninsular populations in context, we can contribute to issues of broader significance within anthropology. Populations within Baja California deftly negotiated their environment and flourished in the peninsula for over 10,000 years. As our knowledge of these ancient cultures improves, we will be able to develop a more complex view of the peninsula's past — in other words, not simply harbor a view that dismisses the ecological and cultural landscape as uncomplicated, but instead encourage a perspective that contributes to an understanding of the diversity of the human record in Baja California and elsewhere

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