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The Protohistoric Period in the Western Great Basin

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THE cultural historical framework for the western Great Basin derives from a compilation of archaeological data which identifies time-sensitive artifact types, most notably series of projectile points, styles of basketry, marine shell beads, and aboriginal ceramics (Elston 1986). The four major divisions of the western Great Basin cultural chronology (Pre-Archaic, Early Archaic, Middle Archaic, and Late Archaic) were made on the basis of perceived changes in adaptive strategies, which are assumed to be reflected in artifact assemblages. Generally speaking, these divisions are associated with the following time periods: Pre-Archaic, 8,000 to 6,000 or 5,000 B.C.; Early Archaic, 5,000 to 2,000 B.C.; Middle Archaic, 2,000 B.C. to A.D. 500; and Late Archaic, A.D. 500 to ca. 1850.

With few exceptions (e.g., Grosscup 1956; Bennyhoff 1958; Tuohy 1984), this unifying chronological scheme, as well as various other regional sequences, does not include a Protohistoric period, a brief, but distinct and critical era that occurred throughout the Great Basin. During this time, various (perhaps most) Numic groups acquired elements of Euroamerican material culture and became aware of Anglo presence through communication with other native groups, and/or brief contacts with Euroamerican trappers, traders, or explorers.

It is important to recognize a Protohistoric period in the cultural historical chronology of the Great Basin, as it is associated with a particular range of time, and is characterized by several distinct artifact

types and cultural developments. The study of protohistoric sites and components can improve our understanding of native cultures as they stood on the brink of intensive contact with Euroamerican society. Moreover, these investigations will aid in the identification of subsequent changes in aboriginal material and nonmaterial culture and the impacts these changes had on ethnographically documented groups. This paper is primarily concerned with the protohistory of the western region, as the author is most familiar with its archaeology, ethnography, and history.

Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary defines protohistory as "The study of man in the times that just antedate recorded history." Moreover, the Dictionary of Anthropology defines the term as simply "early history" (Winick 1966). Perhaps a more appropriate definition for the Protohistoric period in western North America would be "a distinct span of time during which native cultures were modified by the introduction of Euroamerican diseases, materials, and/or practices prior to intensive, face-to-face contact with whites."

PROTOHISTORIC INDICATORS

There are various hallmarks of the Protohistoric period in the western Great Basin, the first two of which are historical developments that are difficult to identify in the archaeological record. These consist of the introduction of the horse and of Old World diseases among certain western Numic and Washoe groups. One segment of the Northern Paiute that originally inhabited

areas of eastern Oregon, known historically as the Bannock, acquired the horse sometime during the early eighteenth century, moved eastward into Northern Shoshone territory, and developed Shoshone-like patterns of subsistence and social structure (Madsen 1958:21, 1980:18-19; Fowler and Liljeblad 1986:455). Cultural changes related to adoption of the horse included the development of fully mounted bands with shifting leadership, eastward and northward expansion onto the Plains to exploit bison, and involvement in a raiding complex for horses and other material goods (Steward 1938:201; Stewart 1970; Layton 1978; Steward and Wheeler-Voegelin 1974).

Initial dispersion of the horse into the Great Basin was facilitated by the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, which provided a major opportunity for the Utes to acquire these animals from the Eastern Pueblos (Twitchell 1914,II:277; Shimkin 1986:517), and resulted in the accelerated spread of horses to the Comanche-Shoshone, linguistic kin of the Utes. According to Haines (1938:Fig. 1; 1939:19) and Vernam (1964:211), some Idaho Shoshone bands were mounted by 1690 or 1700. Driver and Massey (1957:285, Map 85) also indicated that the Northern Shoshone first obtained horses during the late 1600s. There is little or no definitive data concerning the introduction of the horse among western Numic groups, but Madsen (1958:21) suggested that the Bannock probably possessed some horses by 1700. Together with the Shoshone, the Bannock became middlemen in trading the animals to various Columbia Plateau tribes, such as the Nez Percé and Cayuse. If one accepts the date of A.D. 1700 as marking the introduction of the horse among the Bannock, then this date can be used to denote the beginning of the Protohistoric period in the western Great Basin.

It is difficult to determine when European

diseases first impacted native groups of the western Great Basin. New World natives were immunologically defenseless against many Old World diseases, and various epidemics swept through western North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with deadly results. By the end of the eighteenth century, smallpox had weakened the northeastern groups of Shoshone to such an extent that their range had contracted considerably, and entire bands no longer existed (Shimkin 1986:517-518). It seems likely that the effects of smallpox, chicken pox, measles, and cholera were felt by native groups of the western Great Basin prior to their actual contact with fur traders and explorers in the early nineteenth century (cf. Crosby 1972:37; Malouf and Findlay 1986:504-506).

Early modifications in western Numic material culture resulted from the introduction of a variety of mass-produced items obtained through interaction with neighboring native groups, as well as with Anglo trappers and traders. These new elements included iron utensils such as knives, axes, awls, fishhooks, and arrow points, as well as glass beads, blankets, and western clothing. The acquisition of these items had a tremendous effect upon the traditional economy. In many cases, these objects replaced elements of aboriginal material culture. Some Numic groups acquired firearms during protohistoric times, but this occurred mostly among the Northern and Eastern Shoshone, Bannock, Ute, and Comanche (cf. Hughes and Bennyhoff 1986:Table 1).

One of the most common protohistoric artifact types found in archaeological contexts in the western Great Basin is the glass trade bead. Most early glass beads recovered from sites in western North America were produced in the glass factories of Murano, Venice, and originally were distributed to various native groups by Euroamerican

explorers, fur traders, and trappers (Sorensen and Le Roy 1968).

Because the western Great Basin was a peripheral area of the fur trade, it seems likely that many glass beads entered this region through traditional trade networks, especially through trans-Sierran trade (cf. Heizer 1970:238). Early Spanish land expeditions to upper California and the establishment of the Mission system were responsible for the mass distribution of glass beads in California (Motz et al. 1986:116). These desirable items were eagerly acquired by interior California natives and apparently were traded eastward into the Great Basin in a rapid fashion.

Archaeological data from sites in the eastern Sierra Nevada, such as CA-Iny-2 (Riddell 1951), CA-Iny-1700 (Bettinger 1989), and CA-Mno-2122 (Arkush 1989), suggest that glass beads either partially or completely replaced aboriginally produced beads of shell and stone during protohistoric times. Steward (1933:258) indicated that among the Owens Valley and Mono Basin Paiute, glass beads replaced shell beads as a form of money during the ethnographic period. Steward (1938:45) also reported that glass beads had partially replaced those of shell among various groups of Western Shoshone residing in the Lida and Beatty areas of western Nevada during precontact times.

More recently, others have noted the marked decline in shell bead and ornament exchange between California and the Great Basin during protohistoric and early historic times (Hughes and Bennyhoff 1986:249; Bennyhoff and Hughes 1987:161). This decline undoubtedly was due in part to the subjugation and depopulation of various coastal and interior California native groups by the Mission system during the late 1700s and early 1800s.

A cursory review of the archaeological

literature has revealed the presence of glass trade-beads at no fewer than 38 aboriginal sites in the western Great Basin (Fig. 1). The number of glass trade-beads recovered from each of the above sites is presented in Table 1. In addition to the sites listed in Table 1, glass trade-beads also have been documented at a protohistoric site near Masonic, Mono County, California (Tuohy 1969), and at various native sites in Panamint and Death valleys, Inyo County, California (Wallace et al. 1959:9; Hunt 1960:285-287).

At many of the above sites, glass beads are the only nonaboriginal artifacts present in the recovered assemblages. This pattern indicates that most precontact aboriginal industries such as those involving flaked and ground stone, worked bone, ceramics, and basketry remained intact during the Protohistoric period.

DISCUSSION

A major problem associated with the Protohistoric period in the western Great Basin is establishing a uniform date for its inception, as it began at different times in different areas. For example, it seems relatively certain that in eastern Oregon this period commenced around A.D. 1700 with the acquisition of horses by the Bannock. On the other hand, horses and/or glass trade-beads may not have reached the eastern Sierra Nevada region until about A.D. 1775.

In a very general sense, the Protohistoric period in the western Great Basin can be associated with the period A.D. 1700 to 1850. Determining the conclusion of this period is relatively straightforward, as the year 1850 more or less coincides with heavy Anglo use of the California Trail in response to the California Gold Rush (Stewart 1962:193, 217; Malouf and Findlay 1986:507). This development marked the end of an independent lifeway among various groups of Western

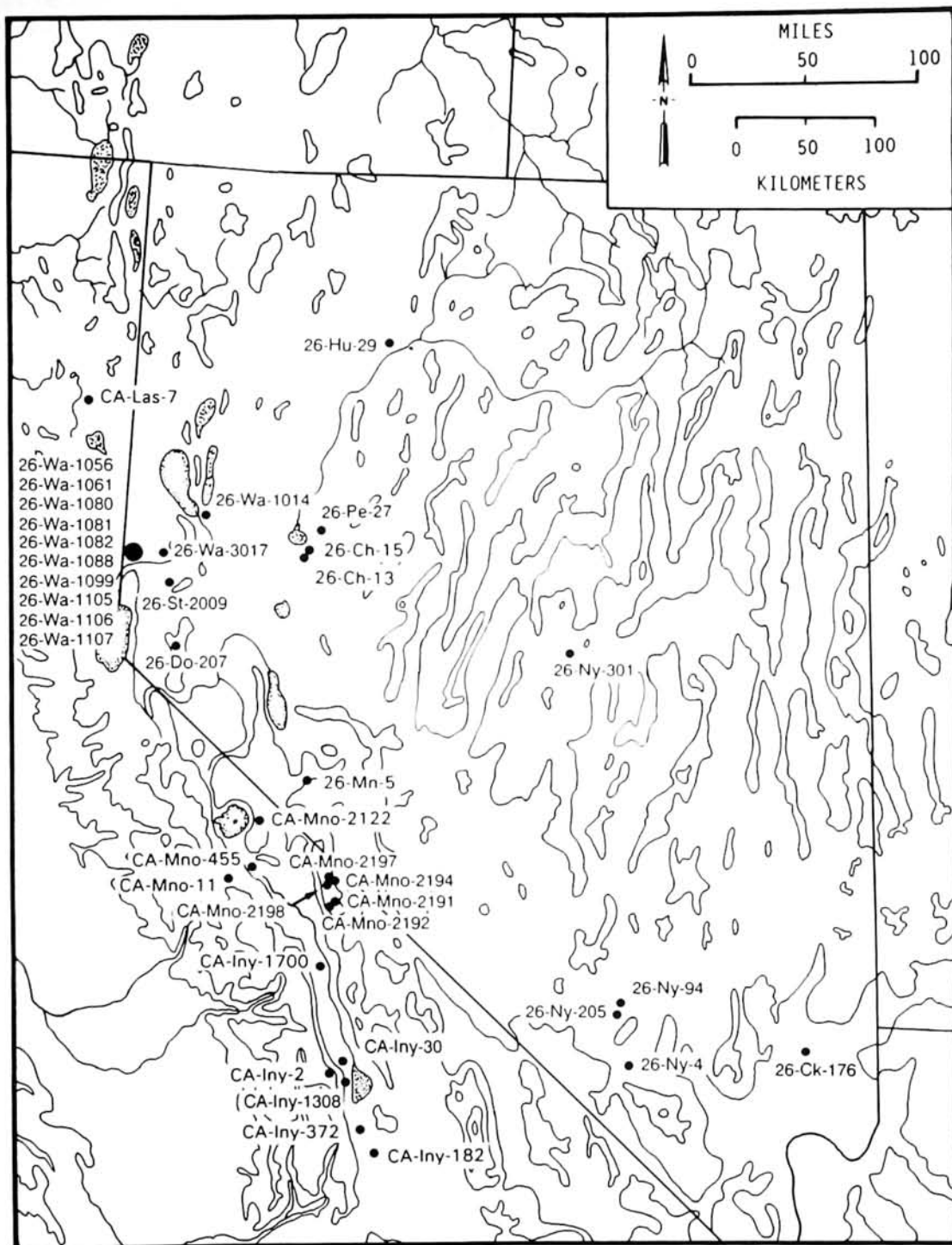


Fig. 1. Location of selected aboriginal sites with glass trade-beads in the western Great Basin.

Table 1
 NUMERICAL DATA CONCERNING GLASS TRADE BEADS RECOVERED
 FROM SELECTED SITES IN THE WESTERN GREAT BASIN

Site Trinomial	Quantity	Reference
26-Ny-94	432	Tuohy 1965
26-Wa-1081	297	Witthoft 1972
CA-Mno-2122	110	Arkush 1989
26-Wa-1107	100	Witthoft 1972
26-Wa-1061	65	Witthoft 1972
CA-Iny-1700	63	Bettinger 1989
CA-Ny-4	62	Worman 1969
CA-Mno-2198	42	R. L. Bettinger, pers. comm. 1990
26-Wa-1105	37	Witthoft 1972
26-Do-207	31	Ruhstaller 1978
26-Wa-1056	30	Witthoft 1972
CA-Mno-11	27	Enfield and Enfield 1964
26-Ny-205	27	Worman 1969
CA-Iny-30	18	Basgall and McGuire 1988
CA-Mno-2192	16	R. L. Bettinger, pers. comm. 1990
CA-Iny-2	9	Riddell 1951
CA-Iny-182	8	Harrington 1957
CA-Iny-1308	8	Wilke 1983
26-St-2009	8	Hattori 1975
CA-Iny-372	7	R. M. Yohe, pers. comm. 1990
26-Mn-5	7	P. J. Wilke, pers. comm. 1990
CA-Mno-455	5	Davis 1964
26-Wa-1014	4	Tuohy and Clark 1979
26-Wa-1080	4	Witthoft 1972
26-Wa-1106	3	Witthoft 1972
26-Pe-27	3	Tuohy 1970
CA-Mno-2191	2	R. L. Bettinger, pers. comm. 1990
CA-Mno-2197	2	R. L. Bettinger, pers. comm. 1990
CA-Mno-2194	1	R. L. Bettinger, pers. comm. 1990
CA-Las-7	1	Riddell 1960
26-Ch-13	1	Loud and Harrington 1929
26-Ck-176	1	Schroeder 1953
26-Hu-29	1	Tuohy 1963
26-Ny-301	1	Thomas 1983
26-Wa-1082	1	Witthoft 1972
26-Wa-1088	1	Witthoft 1972
26-Wa-1099	1	Witthoft 1972
26-Wa-3017	1	Zeier and Elston 1986

Shoshone, Northern Paiute, and Washoe, as mass white migration along the Humboldt River severely impacted native subsistence resources and compelled many groups to become seasonally dependent upon whites in order to survive (Stewart 1962; Clemmer 1974:24-26; Shimkin 1986:523; Malouf and Findlay 1986:507; Arkush 1990). The depletion of a large portion of the aboriginal food base caused various local groups to either partially or completely abandon a

hunting and gathering economy. As ranches and farms became established, many natives attached themselves to these settlements and survived by performing odd jobs. By the mid-1860s, practically every component of aboriginal culture had been modified to some extent through prolonged contact with white society.

CONCLUSION

In view of the above findings, there is no doubt that a Protohistoric period can and

should be included in the cultural historical chronology of the Great Basin, and especially in that of the western Great Basin. There currently is an adequate data base with which to work and upon which to expand, and in time perhaps the temporal associations of this era will be refined.

It is imperative that we gain additional knowledge concerning this era, for it is a time when native Great Basin cultures may have changed more in 150 years than they had in the previous nine or ten millennia. In some respects, the Protohistoric period marked the beginning of cultural "meltdown" during which various groups lost elements of aboriginal culture, experienced depopulation through the spread of European diseases, and embarked on the acculturative journey that brought their world crashing down around them during the Historical period. This era also set into motion the environmental and cultural changes that produced a biased and inaccurate ethnographic record as it relates to precontact Great Basin lifeways.

Protohistoric sites and components provide us with invaluable opportunities to document processes of aboriginal cultural change. This paper is a compilation of data and ideas that makes a step toward that goal.

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