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The Prehistory of Baja California: Advances in the Archaeology of the Forgotten Peninsula

Don Laylander and Jerry D. Moore (eds.)
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006
254 pp., maps, illustrations, tables, bibliography, index;
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A long-needed synthesis of Baja California prehistory has finally appeared with the publication of this edited volume by Laylander and Moore. It is a valuable addition to the literature on the archaeology, ethnography, and linguistics of the Forgotten Peninsula. Being an edited synthesis, the volume suffers from some inconsistencies in content and presentation, but that does little to detract from its overall importance. This volume will be a standard reference for all scholars interested in the prehistory of Baja California and adjacent areas.

The book is divided into 14 chapters, the first five of which serve as an introduction and overview. Laylander presents a valuable overview of the issues in Baja California prehistory in Chapter 1. He summarizes the content to follow and then presents several research domains that are beginning to be addressed in peninsular archaeological study: antiquity, simplicity or complexity, continuity or change, isolation or connections, mobility or sedentism, and coast or interior. Loren G. Davis presents a very brief summary of Baja California's paleoenvironment in the second chapter. While useful as a synthesis, it fails to recognize the biogeographic boundary between Alta and Baja California—a significant consideration when discussing the prehistory and concordant language and material culture distributions. As Tuohy noted years ago, and Moore's studies confirm, the southernmost boundary of Yuman traditions and pottery falls at approximately the same latitude where coastal sage and scrub give way to the distinctive flora of the Central Desert. Mauricio J. Mixco presents a highly useful summary of the peninsula's indigenous languages

in Chapter 3. He breaks with Massey's assignment of Cochimian as "Peninsular Yuman," and reasons that they are too distinct for one to be subsumed into the other. Again, this linguistic boundary should be expected, as it follows the natural boundary noted by Kroeber for Alta California. W. Michael Mathes presents an outstanding compilation of ethnohistoric evidence in Chapter 4, one of the most important in the volume. He discusses the relatively brief periods of contact that occurred between the Spanish explorers and colonizers and the peninsular peoples, and notes the ethnocentric and sometimes wildly fanciful descriptions that resulted. Still, there are vital insights here for archaeological interpretations in the areas of origins, appearance, dress and adornment, material culture, family and community organization, warfare, ceremony, and religion. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

The introductory section concludes in Chapter 5 with an excellent synthesis of Baja California ethnography by Wilken-Robertson and Laylander. The Yuman groups of the northern peninsula were the only ones to survive missionization, and "in spite of more than two centuries of acculturation and selective assimilation, these groups carry on traditions that were inherited from prehistoric times...." They note that the ethnographic study of peninsular groups "has been able to provide a more detailed and vivid picture of some aspects of prehistoric lifeways than the ones that are available through archaeology, but its evidence must be sifted critically."

A south-to-north regional synthesis of prehistoric archaeology on the Baja California landscape begins with Chapter 6. Harumi Fujita's summary of the Cape Region is based on the studies of Massey and other researchers, as well as on some 450 sites documented by her since 1991 under the sponsorship of INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia). A significant amount of recent excavation has been done in this region, in contrast to others, and it is well-summarized in a chapter that should be closely examined by other Pacific coast prehistorians. Fujita's studies note the exploitation of estuarine resources as early as the beginning of the Holocene, about 10,000 years ago, and the first evidence of fishing at about 8,300 B.P. in Babisuri rockshelter on Isla Espíritu Santo. She summarizes evidence of intensive dolphin hunting and sea turtle harvesting from two sites on Cerralvo Island that imply the existence of a

sophisticated maritime technology. She postulates a mode of subsistence featuring milling equipment for desert flora that emerged at the onset of the Holocene and persisted with little change until about A.D. 1000. Fujita's discussion of chronology is the most relevant with regard to the overall antiquity of humans on the peninsula, but her treatment of a possible 40,000-year-old occupation at Isla Espíritu Santo is rather brief, given the magnitude of the site and the consequences this occupation would have on New World prehistory. According to Fujita, these 40,000-year-old ^{14}C dates were derived from 16 separate shell samples associated with lithic flakes, scrapers, debitage, and flaked shell tools. Illustrations of some of these artifacts seem to be warranted, even if a full discussion of the implications of such an ancient deposit is beyond the scope of a peninsular overview.

In chapters 7 and 9, Eric Ritter presents useful and well-developed syntheses of the south-central and Vizcaino Desert regions. These expand upon his own work at Conception Bay and lagoon sites around Guerrero Negro. The environmental contexts, history of research, chronology, and tool forms are well-discussed. Ritter's chapters are the only ones that contain detailed artifact descriptions and illustrations (line drawings), and they remind us of the importance of such presentations in a synthesis like this. A useful summary of the Great Mural rock art and that of adjacent regions is included in Chapter 7. In addition to the myriad of interpretive models, a discussion of the recent dating results from San Borjitas is included. A total of 50 Great Mural rock art samples have been assigned dates of up to 7,500 years. Ritter rightfully notes, "If valid, the tradition's great antiquity and long continuity offer serious challenges to previous models of regional prehistory."

Justin Hyland's summary of the Central Sierras is presented in Chapter 8. He covers the upland region from the Guadalupe range north to the Sierra de San Francisco and Sierra de San Borja, the spine of the central peninsula and the Great Mural rock art region. This is an extremely diverse and complex ecological region because of directional trends in wind, rainfall, fog, and ranges in elevation. Fieldwork carried out by the Proyecto Arte Rupestre Sierra de San Francisco (PARSSF) has produced systematic surveys, rockshelter and open site excavations, and conservation plans for sensitive areas. The Central Sierras have given up three

fluted points and the largest suite of ^{14}C dates on the peninsula. Dates from 81 assays span a chronological range from the Pleistocene-Holocene transition to the historic period, with distribution peaks during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D., as well as at 1,300 B.P. and 400 to 200 B.P. Hyland's chapter presents an excellent summary of ongoing archaeological studies that seem destined to alter our conceptions about the Great Mural artists and their ancestors.

Isla Cedros, one of the exciting new areas of peninsular archaeological study, is discussed by Matthew Des Lauriers in Chapter 10. While this enigmatic island has been the subject of some of the earliest and most detailed ethnohistoric accounts, serious archaeological exploration has only recently been carried out. In contrast to the low population densities and high mobility patterns for much of the Central Desert and adjacent coasts, Isla Cedros was apparently home to large sedentary or semi-sedentary groups of maritime hunters. The archaeological expression of this pattern is manifest in deep and dense shell midden deposits replete with sea mammal, dolphin, bird, and whale bones, as well as house features. One site has 481 mapped house foundations—an incredible number in comparison with mainland peninsular sites. The Cedros "canoe" is also discussed. It was a composite craft with bundles of wooden poles lashed to a central split log. This presumably made for a more seaworthy vessel than the typical balsa of the coastal Pacific.

In Chapter 11, Eric Ritter summarizes the prehistory of Bahia de Los Angeles, one of the driest regions of the peninsula. He describes the history of research, chronology, technology, subsistence and settlement, exchange and travel, idea systems, and prospects for research. The tool kit for this region was simple but very functional, and is well illustrated in this chapter. A signature archaeological element includes *Dosinia ponderosa* shells in the coastal middens which were flaked by percussion techniques to produce serrated edges for scraping or cutting.

A framework for the region's chronology has begun to emerge from radiocarbon and obsidian hydration studies. The earliest sample from a marine shell is dated at 6,100 \pm 200 years. Small triangular or side-notched Comondú points apparently replaced larger projectile points some 1,000 to 1,500 years ago. Contacts with other regions can be demonstrated based upon obsidian source

analyses and the existence of possible historic ceramics and cotton fibers from Sonora. Bahia de Los Angeles was the logical landing place for voyages traversing the Sea of Cortez by way of its stepping-stone islands. Evidence for this is elusive, but may eventually be found.

Chapter 12, by Jerry Moore, presents an excellent summary of the San Quintín-El Rosario region, covering the geographical orientation, history of research, chronology, extra-regional links, adaptation, settlement and social organization, idea systems, and research prospects. Moore summarizes the pattern found in this area as “cross-peninsular transhumant adaptation,” although he notes that additional data and excavations are needed to confirm, modify, or reject the initial findings. A discussion of two petroglyph motifs, the “*tabla*” and the “rattlesnake,” is of particular interest. Wooden *tablas* as described by Hedges are associated with the Kiliwa *ñiwèy* ceremony as interpreted by Meigs. The purpose of this ceremony was to placate the dead and keep them from returning. Wooden *tablas* were highly venerated objects and were hidden from missionaries whenever possible. Several sites in canyon escarpments of the eastern Sierra San Pedro Martír contain *tabla* representations in open rock exposures. A second, “rattlesnake” motif consists of pecked diamond shapes or nested parallel zigzag lines. These may be connected to female puberty initiation ceremonies, as suggested by ethnographic analogies with a broad southern California pattern.

Chapter 13, by Julia Bendimez Patterson, Regional Director of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, summarizes efforts to manage prehistoric archaeology on the peninsula. She outlines the problems of explosive land development, responsibilities for conservation, the types of archaeological studies conducted by her agency, and the dissemination of knowledge as a necessary element of management. She notes that Baja California has not been given priority as a national archaeological region as it is far removed from the government in central Mexico and is culturally divergent from the broad pattern of Mesoamerican

archaeology. This has begun to change due to the highly visible studies of Great Mural rock art and the important investigations of shell middens on the coasts and islands that have attracted the attention of national and international scholars. Julia’s dedication to preserving, investigating, and interpreting the archaeological heritage of Baja California is well known to those of us who have been privileged to work with her. Her chapter needs to be read by anyone contemplating research on the “Forgotten Peninsula.”

The book’s final chapter, by Don Laylander, attempts to summarize those preceding it. He has entitled it, “Towards a More Complex Understanding of Baja California’s Past.” As the earlier chapters demonstrate, there is a richness to the ethnographic, ethnohistoric, paleoenvironmental, and archaeological setting here that is difficult to match anywhere else in North America. Teasing out its details will require future scholars to build considerably on the framework synthesized in this volume, but regional differences and subtle changes are already beginning to emerge from the broad cultural patterns described in the literature several generations ago. It is unfortunate that the present synthesis does not include the Sierra San Pedro Martír, the Gulf Islands, or the northern Frontier. All have recently been the subject of important archaeological studies that bear on peninsular patterns. The Frontera omission is a particularly serious gap in coverage.

The subject of the region’s affinity with cultures in Alta California appears sporadically throughout the book, most notably in the chapter on linguistics; however, a wider discussion of ties between Baja California, the Colorado River, and the Sonora region would have been valuable. However, these are minor annoyances, given the important contributions made by this synthesis. For the scholar or student of prehistory, the bibliography of this volume alone is reason enough to acquire it. Laylander and Moore’s compilation is sure to become a standard reference for anyone interested in the original people of Baja California.

