

# TWENTY YEARS OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT CSU NORTHRIDGE: FROM STUDENT CLUB TO RESEARCH ORIENTATIONS IN THE POST-CRM ERA

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## ABSTRACT

The archaeological program at California State University, Northridge has undergone significant change during the last 20 years. Much of this evolution reflects the changing landscape of archaeology in southern California. This evolution is discussed from its beginnings 20 years ago in a student club to current emphases on cultural resources management, undergraduate and graduate student training projects and development of cooperative research agreements for the study of Channel Islands prehistory.

## DISCUSSION

This essay is a personal perspective on the recent history of California archaeology, and the place of the Northridge Center for Public Archaeology (the "Center") in these developments. My views of California archaeology's last 2 decades and where it may be headed in the next century have been shaped by my experience as director of the Center and a faculty member in Anthropology at CSU-Northridge for the last 8 years. I share these views happily but with a word of historiographic caution. My conclusions, after all, are based on the singularity of personal experience and fallible wisdom. On the other hand, my perspectives also result from 2 decades of active fieldwork, service as president of several state and national archaeological organizations, consulting with local, state, and federal agencies regarding archaeological policy, university teaching, and a certain amount of "inkshed" concerning issues discussed here.

In operation over the last 20 years, the Center is one of the most continuously active archaeological organizations in southern California in recent decades. More than that, the Center owes its existence to the historical forces that are the subject of this discussion. The Center emerged between 1970 and 1972 as a student club, dubbed the

Northridge Archaeological Research Center, or NARC, a name with certain connotations emergent from the student culture of that era. The name was changed to the more sober Center for Public Archaeology in 1984 at the suggestion of university administrators who thought the old name a bit too evocative of the lifestyle of some of the students in this club. The impetus for this change involved more than propriety, however. The Center's charter was rewritten, establishing it as an arm of the Institute of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and it was brought under the administrative control of a faculty director and the Dean of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. This charter also dedicated the Center to a program of professional archaeological research, student training, and community service. Most important, these institutional changes were adaptations to the astonishingly dynamic environment of archaeology in California, indeed in the nation, during the last 2 decades. The Center and the discipline as a whole struggled to adapt to a number of trends; trends that I believe continue to shape California archaeology for better and worse.

### The Limited Good

Anthropologists describe the concept of "the limited good" to explain patterns of socioeconomic competition that characterize

some cultures. This concept is based on a belief by the participants of a cultural system that all of life's good things are a fixed quantity and, therefore, one person's success is another's deprivation. This outlook has the corollary that success is never legitimate but always dangerous, and those who succeed deserve to be brought down. In my view, the idea of the limited good has struck the discipline with a vengeance, beginning in the 1970s. In that decade, the number of traditionally high-prestige academic jobs in archaeology began to decline rapidly as faculties "tenured-up" and anthropology departments began to "down-size" after the baby-boomers passed through the universities. Production of advanced degrees remained high, however, making the search for high-prestige work and academic security even more elusive.

While this was happening, state and federal environmental laws brought into existence the cultural resources management (CRM) industry. For the first time, more archaeologists found work in private business and government than academia. Anthropology departments and research units such as the Center found themselves the focal point of interest of even more degree-seekers and those looking for practical experience that would qualify them for CRM employment. The Center, by my informal count, has played a material role in training at least 50 professional archaeologists active in the state today but this number is likely higher. Outstanding archaeological programs at various CSU campuses have made similar contributions, including those at Sonoma, Long Beach, Fullerton, and San Diego.

Career crisis averted, right? Not entirely. Although archaeologists were working more, many seemed to be enjoying it less. There was, and is, a pervasive sense that archaeologists take CRM jobs only when academic work is unavailable, and a 2-tier prestige system relegates those outside of academia to a second-class status in the field (cf. Raab et al. 1980). A gloomy assessment of this situation suggests that persons who might have left the field prior to the CRM-era to find a career elsewhere now remain to act out their resentments under a view of the limited good. This view ignores, of

course, that many dedicated and talented archaeologists take satisfaction from their work in private business and government. Nevertheless, the professional expansion of American archaeology has also attracted some practitioners whose personalities, philosophies, or training inevitably render them incompatible with the demands of either academic or CRM work. The dramatic transformation of archaeological work of the last 20 years has created intense competition on every professional level, but one particularly punishing to "lone-wolf" or "cowboy" iconoclasts.

As a relatively visible presence, the Center has acted from the beginning as a lightning rod for some of these conflicts but is hardly alone in this regard. Glassow (1990:39) is probably correct in suggesting that "California looks like a nightmare to archaeologists outside the state", owing to the chronic internecine warfare that some describe as the "California Problem." Glassow (1990:39) also points out, quite correctly, that none of these problems are different in kind from those anywhere else in the nation. Still, it is telling that an explanation of California's archaeological ethical climate is required (Glassow 1990) at all. California has a predictably high rate of conflict resulting from fierce competition by a large number of archaeologists for scarce resources. And yet, while these forces produce a potential for conflict, these clashes take form and direction in a professional environment with few mechanisms for maintaining order.

Some of the permanently disgruntled, reacting with anger and frustration but little at stake in terms of jobs or professional standing, have become arsonists in the house of California archaeology. These are only the most extreme cases, however. If conflict has its roots in competition for CRM work and professional prestige, it is also nourished in part by a weak sense of professionalism. Many individuals identify themselves as professionals in relation to the source of their paycheck, but have a weak commitment to, or indeed even understanding of, ethical and professional standards (Raab 1984; Glassow 1990). Conflicts are usually couched in terms of high-sounding

principles, but tracing them to their source frequently reveals the same small groups of antagonists or competition for prestige, political influence, and money.

Academic institutions in southern California have also largely abandoned overt intellectual and professional responsibility for CRM work, leaving a conflict-prone vacuum of leadership. In many other states, CRM work is carried out in what amounts to a lingering, pre-CRM feudal system directed by influential regional universities and senior faculty researchers. Even private CRM firms in these regions tend to be staffed by the students of these "warlords". Like dictatorships everywhere, these arrangements are subject to many abuses but they also tend to impose order in the community. I am not endorsing professional totalitarianism, merely lamenting that the California academic establishment seems to have no obvious interest in leading California archaeology out of its current difficulties apart from the individual efforts of a few members of the professorate.

In some cases, these disputes have taken a grim emotional toll, triggered lawsuits, and enlisted Native Americans, anti-development community organizations, and other disaffected groups to become, wittingly or otherwise, mercenaries on the side of archaeological combatants. These problems are wearing, but do not make out archaeologists to be worse than any number of other interest groups. It would be naive to expect archaeology to leap fully formed into a profession in a decade or 2. The solution to these problems is time (cf. Glassow 1990:47). Despite the problems enumerated above, archaeology has made substantial progress toward becoming a profession in the last 20 years. We can all hope for growth of a professional ethic in the field. Better yet, perhaps the last 2 decades of our history will convince us to work toward this goal.

### Academic Myopia

The fact that the Center was originally formed by students reflects an interesting fact about academia: students perceived much more accurately than their faculty mentors how dramatically archaeology was going to be transformed by the advent of

CRM. This was understandable in that students hoped to launch new kinds of careers, while tenured faculty were absorbed with career patterns of the past. Students also called for a mobilization to deal with the crisis of site preservation; a crisis that stimulated development of a public archaeology movement in California and in the country (cf. McGimsey 1972:1-10). With some notable exceptions, the academic institutions of California failed to sense or really care about the fundamental changes overtaking the discipline, leaving students with little or no professional leadership in this brave new world of American archaeology. The sometimes profound nature of this estrangement is reflected even today in academics who offer lavish criticism of public archaeology without any apparent awareness of how their own intellectual neglect of this work creates some of the difficulties they relish condemning. At the Center, this trend produced a spectrum of outcomes.

### The Good

A series of part-time directors, typically grad students or recently graduated part-time anthropology faculty, directed the Center in its first decade. Since this position involved no additional pay or job security, there was no necessary incentive, beyond the force of one's professional idealism/masochism, to invest time and energy in the Center. Remarkably, many of the directors in this era did make major efforts to build up reference collections of artifacts, site records, work with students, engage in field and lab research, and launch a variety of other professional activities. Happily, these efforts have not gone entirely unrewarded. Among these directors and their students, many have since gone on to careers in the field. These actions sustain our faith in the idealism of many archaeologists when combative self-interest often seems more normative.

### The Bad

During lapses of oversight between directors or owing to directors' uncertain authority and tenure, some seized every opportunity to behave as badly as they would like. Students factions warred on each other for paying CRM work and control of Center activities, driving away capable and idealistic

students in the process. Some of these "students" occupied the Center as their private club for a decade or more, without obvious intent to graduate.

### The Ugly

Without consistent professional leadership, a destructive sense of competition and confrontation between Center members and other institutions and researchers sometimes erupted. These impulses were expressed as a kind of counter-culture or revolutionary virtue with moral overtones, a pose with considerable chic within the student culture of that era. Students and others indulged themselves in the excitement of posturing as outsiders persecuted for standing against those characterized as sell-outs to development interests or corrupt in other ways. A clue to the motivation behind this stance is provided by noting the traits of those defined as corrupt. This category tended to include anyone affiliated with a major scientific or educational institution, anyone with impressive scientific credentials, persons holding positions of responsibility in any mainstream job and those merely guilty of obtaining steady, paying work in the field. The dynamic at work there probably had much more to do with the psychology of the limited good than a need to rescue the field from incompetent and corrupt archaeologists. Unfortunately, this aspect of our history lingers, often preventing civil dialog when real problems require constructive solution.

### The Post-CRM Era

I inherited leadership of the Center in the mid-1980s, in what I think can be characterized as the post-CRM era in California archaeology. By this characterization I do not mean to imply that CRM archaeology will not continue to play its extremely important role in California archaeology. To a vast extent, CRM research is California archaeology. On the other hand, I think the political climate of California and the nation is now far removed from the thinking of 2 decades ago when the present historic preservation system was created. The public and their elected officials seem much more ambivalent about all forms of natural resource protection. The public still seems to value resource protection, but not at the cost of

too many jobs. Undoubtedly the current state and national economic crisis has sharpened this dilemma, and anti-preservation attitudes may soften with the return of a growing economy.

We are likely to enter the next century with essentially the CRM system now in place, if we are lucky. In the public media, environmental regulation is currently being tarred with the brush of economic stagnation by certain political and business leaders. We can only hope that this view is not shared by a majority of the public. Even under the most benign scenarios, however, a surge in CRM employment probably is not in our future. In short, I think the field has worked out the fundamental institutional and professional accommodations that will guide the field in the foreseeable future. On the plus side, the scramble to adjust to the overwhelming impact of CRM, felt everywhere except in the most insulated academic realms, is easing. But where do we go from here? In that question is the essence of the post-CRM era.

American archaeology is an unfinished enterprise and its fortunes will continue to change with society whether archaeologists like it or not. Within our professional lives, I think the last 20 years have shown us with increasing clarity that CRM and academic archaeology have different but complementary strengths, and these differences have important implications for institutions such as the Center. Consider the following trends:

### Corporate Archaeology

Twenty years ago, it was not clear how the vast amount of work mandated by CRM legislation would get done. It was imaginable at least that universities, which had done most of the work in the past, would perform a great deal of the needed research. This clearly has not proven to be the case in California. Although a few CRM practitioners continue to operate out of what amounts to their garage, consulting archaeology in southern California seems to be increasingly concentrated in medium to large corporations. A clue to how things are going in this regard is reflected in the fact that these businesses have begun to buy each other, a

clear indication of the maturation of this industry. These enterprises have the capital to maintain a professional staff, buy equipment, and, perhaps most importantly, offer a reassuring image of solidity and accountability to clients. Private practitioners cannot match these resources, and university-based CRM units in southern California have increasingly shown themselves unwilling to compete at this scale. A CRM-related research unit was abandoned at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the 1970s, and another eliminated at UC Santa Barbara in the next decade.

These trends indicate, I think, an emerging division of labor in which university-based research units engage in basic archaeological research, and comparatively small CRM projects or project components requiring special expertise. Among the latter, specialized faunal or artifact studies are emerging as important research foci. At the Center, we have devoted a considerable amount of our labor in the last 5 years to cooperative research agreements with the U.S. Navy and several marine sciences institutions for work on San Clemente Island. This work is aimed at basic research, specializing in coastal prehistory. This work is also an engine driving a new M.A. program in public archaeology at CSU Northridge.

### Professional Inequality

At the same time, however, this division of labor must not contribute to a hardening of divisions between so-called pure research and CRM-related work. I have already commented on the difficulties that plague the discipline as a result of real or perceived differences in the worth of work in various settings. I think we must recognize that all archaeologists, regardless of where they eventually work, get their training initially in academia. This training is supposed to be rigorous in intellectual and technical terms. Less apparent in most academic programs is a recognition that the discipline could also benefit from instructing students about the worth of different kinds of jobs in field, and instilling a sense of worth and self-worth in all of these jobs. In my view, one of contemporary archaeology's most self-destructive impulses is academic enforcement of a kind of professional caste system. Some universi-

ty faculty members act as shields for their own interests in implying that any student who enters their graduate program can expect prestigious academic employment after graduation. I wonder how many students would undertake the expense and difficulty of graduate work if departments were required to provide them with statistics on the sort of work obtained by all graduates during the previous decade? Comparison of the number of academic jobs available in this country in any given year with the same year's degree production figures (not to mention unsuccessful job-seekers from previous years) makes for an unsettling but unavoidable conclusion: Many archaeologists, regardless of their intellect, accomplishments, where they get their degrees, or their career aspirations are going to end up doing some aspect of CRM work or not work in the field at all.

Private and governmental institutions clearly do not have the capability of pushing ahead basic research in ways that academic institutions can, nor do they have the obligation to instill a strategic sense of ethics and professionalism. Please do not misinterpret this point. Public and private agencies do conduct productive research and they are not indifferent to ethical standards. They clearly are involved with both of these. I am merely suggesting that academic institutions can capitalize on their freedom to pursue research problems that any business can ill afford to subsidize, and public agencies usually cannot do at all. At the same time, concepts of professionalism, ethics, and career selection can be dealt with at the academic source while archaeologists' careers are still formative.

Based on these trends, what does the future hold for institutions such as the Center? Recent history suggests a more defined division of labor in California archaeology of the future. The forces that have brought about this division have created intra-disciplinary conflict as well as opportunities. The former problems will likely ameliorate with professional maturation, but this process can be assisted by training students for many possible career tracks in the field. Among the opportunities brought by change, institutions such as the Center can

advance archaeological scholarship by emphasizing focused programs of basic and occasional contract research. Long-term commitments can be made to programs of basic research that are difficult or impossible for commercial entities. These programs afford opportunities for faculty and student research, as well as training explicitly designed to prepare student archaeologists for the diversity of work that exists in the field today. A major part of our efforts at the Center are focused on this kind work, emphasizing research on coastal prehistory (Raab and Yatsko 1990, 1992; Raab 1992a, 1992b). In these roles, perhaps the Center can finally deliver the things students set out to find 20 years ago.

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