

CEREMONY AND WARFARE ALONG THE LOWER COLORADO RIVER DURING THE PROTOHISTORIC PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic accounts of indigenous lifeways of the Lower Colorado River are replete with reports of warfare and strife. Yet, the archaeology of the region is dominated by large sites comprised of intaglios and associated features that have been interpreted as region-wide centers. In this paper, we explore various interpretations that reconcile endemic warfare with region-wide ceremonial behavior. The evidence is aided with the results from recent surveys of intaglio complexes combined with ethnographic reports. A new model is offered on the role of ceremony and warfare in past Yuman society.

The Lower Colorado River valley has been referred to as a "linear oasis"; it extends over a distance of approximately 175 miles north-south from Needles, California, to Yuma, Arizona. The verdant floodplain of the river, which varies in width from a few hundred meters to several kilometers, is surrounded by harsh desert. The floodplain is bordered by alluvial piedmont fans that slope down from the 15 mountain ranges that cluster near the river (Shlemon 1976). Desert pavement covers these fans restricting vegetation to the hardiest of plants.

The picture that emerges of prehistory from the archaeology of the Lower Colorado River is heavily skewed. Intuition as well as ethnographic accounts suggest that most domestic activities were restricted to the floodplain. Yet the power of the river has left no sites and few clues as to the nature of everyday life. The piedmont fans are desolate and probably were used for specific events and activities. But almost all we know of the archaeological record derives from these surfaces. These sites bear testament to a complex

network of trails, temporary shelters, shrines, and quarries. One of the most interesting and enigmatic features of the desert pavements are what are termed intaglios, places where the pavement has been scraped away forming abstract, geometric, zoomorphic, or anthropomorphic images. Some have argued that the intaglios and associated rock alignments are as old as human occupation of the Lower Colorado River valley. Most agree, however, that the anthropomorphs at the major centers are relatively recent, within the last few hundred years.

What do the intaglios mean? Clearly, they are symbolic representations that offer insight into the cosmology and ceremonialism of the area's inhabitants. While we are not in a position to interpret the symbols, we are intrigued by the possible role of these features in the late prehistoric and protohistoric Yuman culture. This paper examines this role in relation to one Yuman ceremonial, the *keruk*, and its place in the inter-tribal cultural dynamics of the Lower Colorado River.

ETHNOHISTORIC ELEMENTS OF THE *KERUK*

The *keruk*, or mourning ceremony, and its variants comprise a widespread cultural phenomenon among Native Americans of coastal southern California, the southern California desert, and the Lower Colorado River region. In historic times, cultures such as the Quechan, Maricopa, Halchidhoma, Cocopa, Diegueño, Tipai, Ipai, Luiseño, Cupeño, Cahuilla, Gabrielino, Serrano, and Kitanemuk, all celebrated an elaborate mourning ceremony in which the recent dead were honored; the original *keruk*, commemorating the death of the creator, was reenacted; and stories and songs related to the creation of the world were related. The ceremony and all its parts usually covered several days and people traveled from considerable distances to attend. During this time many social activities took place, such as marriage arrangements, gift giving and exchange of food and goods, resolution of personal disputes and interlineage enmities, and the naming of children born since the last ceremony (Alvarez de Williams 1983; Bean 1972, 1978; Bean and Smith 1978a, 1978b, 1978c; Bean and Shippek 1978; Bee 1981, 1983; Benedict 1924; Blackburn and Bean 1978; DuBois 1905, 1908; Forbes 1965; Forde 1931; Gifford 1933; Hooper 1920; James 1960; B. Johnston 1962; F. Johnston 1965; Kelly 1977; Kroeber 1925; Luomala 1978; Sparkman 1908; Spier 1933; Stewart 1983; Strong 1929; Waterman 1910; Woods 1986).

Woods (1986) and Johnson (1985; Solari and Johnson 1982) have independently posited the existence of a *keruk* trail, a north-south pathway extending from Pilot Knob, near Winterhaven, California, to Newberry Mountain near Needles, California (Figure 1). Both locations are sacred to the Yumans. Newberry Mountain is known to be *Avikwaame*, the place where the creation of life occurred. As to Pilot Knob, a Quechan elder remarked:

Pilot Knob has religious significance because of its role in creation tales; it functions as a power place on the *Keruk* trail, through which journey the

sorrows of the Yuma people are healed. It has, as well, an historical significance -- both the creation tales where "marks" such as intaglios were made by the first people and as a designator of the extent of Quechan, Kamia, and Cocopah territory. [Quechan Indian Tribe 1989:2]

Combining archaeological data with ethnographic accounts, Ezzo and Altschul (1993) have offered an hypothesis that links the major intaglio complexes along the Lower Colorado River. They suggest that a *keruk* pilgrimage began at Pilot Knob, where a large *keruk* was held which brought together people from throughout the region. Afterwards most people returned home, while a small number of pilgrims moved north along the trail, holding local *keruks* along the way at minor intaglio complexes such as Senator Wash and major *keruks* at centers such as Ripley and Blythe until they reached Newberry Mountain. But if these features were part of a desert-wide mourning ceremony unlike those practiced elsewhere, why are intaglios only present in substantial numbers at various locales along the river and not elsewhere in the Sonoran, Colorado, and Mojave deserts?

Ezzo and Altschul's (1993) argument linking intaglios with the *keruk* is tenuous, resting heavily on Bourke's (1889) account that documents an intaglio-like feature as an integral part of the Mohave *keruk*. In our current attempt to link the various potential causes into a coherent model of late prehistoric and protohistoric behavior, we have reexamined the historic record. In that endeavor we have been struck by one characteristic that distinguishes Yuman cultures from non-Yuman ones: the endemic nature of warfare.

ALLIANCE, WARFARE AND CEREMONIALISM

Kroeber (1925) describes two major alliances of tribes that covered western Arizona, southern California, and northern Baja California. The alliances were loosely organized networks. Within

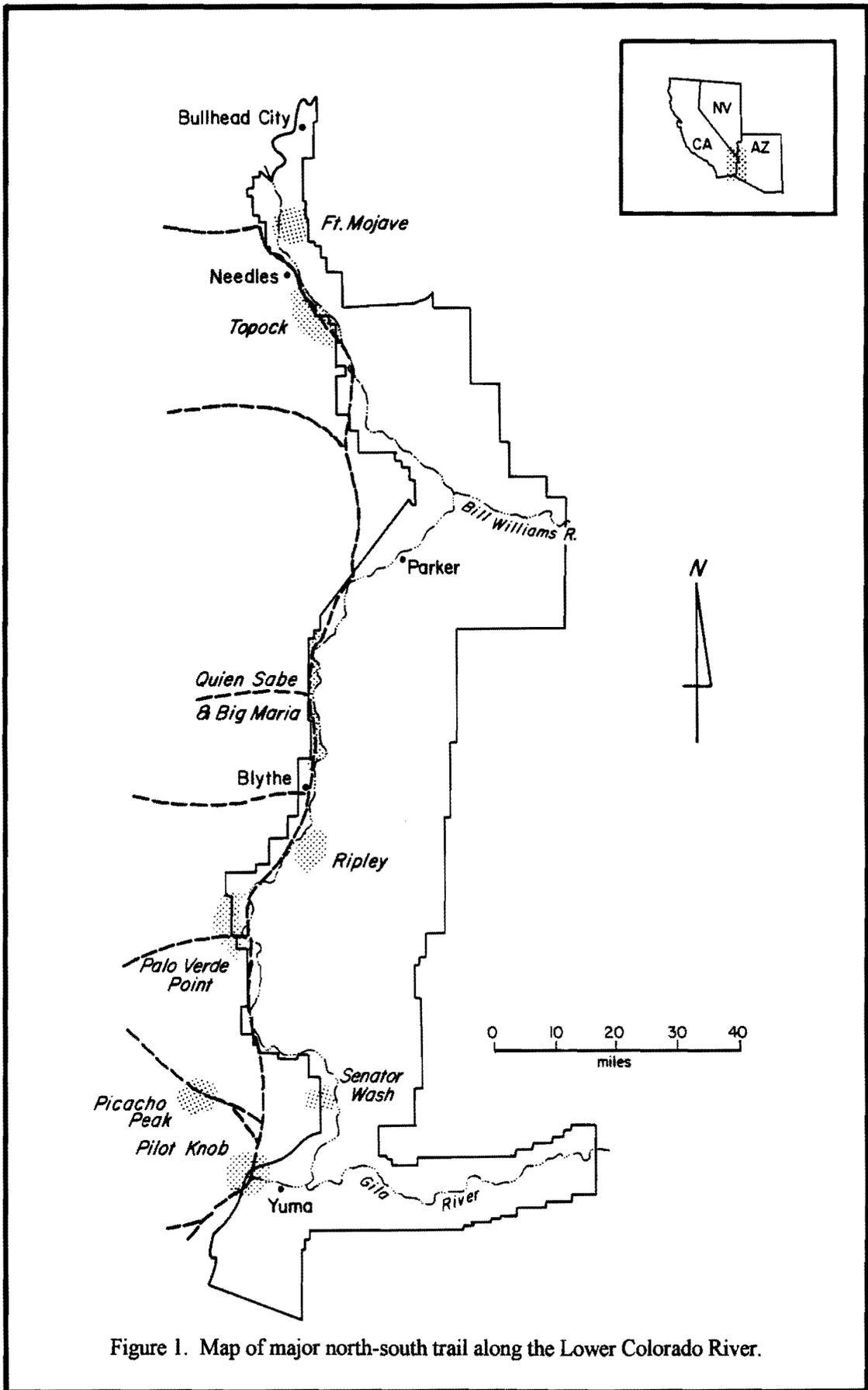


Figure 1. Map of major north-south trail along the Lower Colorado River.

an alliance, groups enjoyed amicable trade relationships, intermarriage, cooperation in warfare, and freedom of movement. Between alliances, however, relationships were antagonistic. White (1974) put forth the argument that the inimical relationships were based on resource competition. Stone (1991:37) cites limited resources as a partial factor, but goes on to state that:

... it would not seem to account for the intense intertribal warfare of the 18th and 19th centuries, which involved long-distance travel by intertribal war parties, a considerable degree of planning, and large fierce battles as well as ambushes. . . . Prior to that period, Spanish accounts and Mohave tales indicate frequent conflict among river groups, perhaps related to competition for resources or the migration of groups to the river from dessicated Lake Cahuilla (Stone 1981). Conflict along the Colorado caused the Halchidoma, and possibly the original Maricopa, to migrate eastward along the Gila River. The lucrative Spanish-instigated trade in horses and native slaves, which spread northward from Mexico during the 1700s, probably intensified conflicts, strengthened alliances, and increased the geographic range of warfare (Dobyns et al. 1957). To the historic river Yuman tribes, warfare was a source of tribal unity, spiritual power, and individual prestige.

According to Stone (1981:189), warfare along the Lower Colorado River intensified during the late 1700s. At this time, population along the river increased, due not to changes in the birth/death ratio but as a result of immigration from the Salton Trough stemming from the desiccation of Lake Cahuilla. Indigenous cultures were unable to increase agricultural productivity because of constraints imposed by the Colorado River and aboriginal technology. One response to the increased population, then, was warfare.

Stone's (1981) reconstruction places the peak warfare period precisely in the interval of the suspected use of the major ceremonial centers along the *keruk* trail. How do we reconcile the pattern of warfare with ceremonies that supposedly tied together the groups along the river? One plausible explanation is that the ceremonial system periodically transcended the politics of the

day. The pilgrimage between Pilot Knob and Newberry Mountain would have been important to all the groups, necessitating safe passage to pilgrims. Perhaps only those spiritual leaders whose office was recognized by all groups could undertake the pilgrimage. Because of inimical relations between various groups, the exchange of material and religious culture would have been impeded. The individual *keruks* held along the trail would have taken on local color. The stylistic differences between the intaglios at Pilot Knob, Ripley, and Blythe might best be explained under these conditions as territorial markers of competing groups. The anthropomorphic and geometric intaglios at Ripley are larger than those at Pilot Knob and are executed in a style that is utterly different. In turn, the Blythe intaglios are considerably larger than those at Ripley and again are stylistically different. One could account for the differences by viewing Pilot Knob as the ceremonial center for the Quechan and related groups in the Yuma area, Ripley could be seen as the focus of the Halchidoma along the middle reach of the Lower Colorado River, and the Blythe and Topoc intaglios as ceremonial loci for the Mohave of the upper reach of the river.

But such an interpretation seems too facile, focusing on idiosyncratic differences that may not be integrated in the larger cultural context. It is important to remember that although the size and the styles of the intaglios differ between centers, as a group they have a common cosmological basis. Basically, they are all intaglios, which sets them apart from all other types of religious symbols used in the American Southwest. The symbols, although portrayed in different sizes and styles, reflect a common belief system. Certainly, culturally related groups often war with each other. The differences in style could have functioned as markers of ethnicity and territoriality between groups who, although hostile to one another, shared common religious beliefs and ceremonies.

The above argument is based on the notion that warfare created a cultural barrier. In contrast, certain aspects of warfare may have contributed to

the spread of rituals. This practice can be clearly seen by the displacement of groups such as the Halchidhoma, who carried their *keruk* ceremonies eastward to the Gila River in the 1820s. We can speculate that the same mechanisms probably operated in the past, and resulted in the expansion of the *keruk* along the lower 175 miles of the Colorado River and westward to Lake Cahuilla.

In addition to this geographic expansion, warfare may have contributed to a greater integration of cultural ideas between warring groups. The taking of captives, for example, might increase the cultural exchange of styles and ideas between groups. Over time, a homogenizing effect on culture might result, perhaps even more so than under conditions of friendly exchange of economic goods and marriage partners. Just as warfare dispersed groups by driving them away from their land, it also integrated the various groups through the practice of taking captives, thus perpetuating their shared cultural traditions. This might have helped maintain the region-wide shared iconography of the intaglios, as well as the local variation in specific symbols that are peculiar to individual groups. Further, such practices might help account for the widespread similarities between the *keruk* ceremonies in ethnographic times.

Thus far we have discussed two broad patterns of cultural dynamics that relate warfare and ritual along the Lower Colorado River. We acknowledge that both warfare and ritual were integral aspects of life in this region, and could have served, depending on circumstances, either as mechanisms of cultural isolation or of integration. Their influence no doubt extended into many fundamental aspects of social and economic life. When warfare ceased in the middle of the nineteenth century, it appears that some of its cultural significance was transferred to the ritual system, primarily the *keruk* ceremony. The mock battles, for example, ostensibly recreated mythological conflicts (Forde 1931), but they likely commemorated the recently terminated hostilities between groups as well. Another common feature of the *keruk* involves the redistribution of economic goods, particularly food. One of the primary

functions of Yuman warfare was economic, and we can view the seizing of lands or goods as one type of redistribution, albeit an unequal one. Following Stone (1981), one can argue that the Yuman resource base could not be expanded with the existing technology. This type of warfare, therefore, would have constituted an adaptive response to resource stress. The *keruk* may have become the focal point of economic redistribution only after hostilities between groups had ceased.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CORRELATES

How, then, does the archaeological record of Pilot Knob and Ripley fit the theoretical discussion presented? How can we use the archaeological record to demonstrate whether our arguments have any validity? In our assessment, three issues regarding material culture and stylistic variation must be addressed. The first aspect concerns material culture. We hypothesize that the ethnographic accounts of the *keruk* represent a ceremonial complex whose character changed after the termination of hostilities and the establishment of reservations. Consequently, we do not expect a perfect correspondence between the features of centers, such as Pilot Knob and Ripley, which were in use during the period of hostilities, and the ethnographic descriptions of ceremonies. Therefore, we expect features at Pilot Knob and Ripley to reflect religious activity more so than economic activity, and this is supported by three localities at Pilot Knob (IMP-6940, IMP-6942, and IMP-6954; Ezzo and Altschul 1993) and three at Ripley (GG 2, GG 5, and GG 6; Holmlund 1993) that have very strong material cultural correlates to ethnographic ritual, in particular the spatial layout of temporary dwellings depicted by Forde (1931; Figure 2), and little evidence of economic activities. At reservation-period sites we would expect the proportion of activities to shift in the latter direction.

The second significant aspect concerns stylistic variation in intaglios (Figures 3 to 5). We believe that these differences are best explained by the notion of a cultural barrier created by warfare.

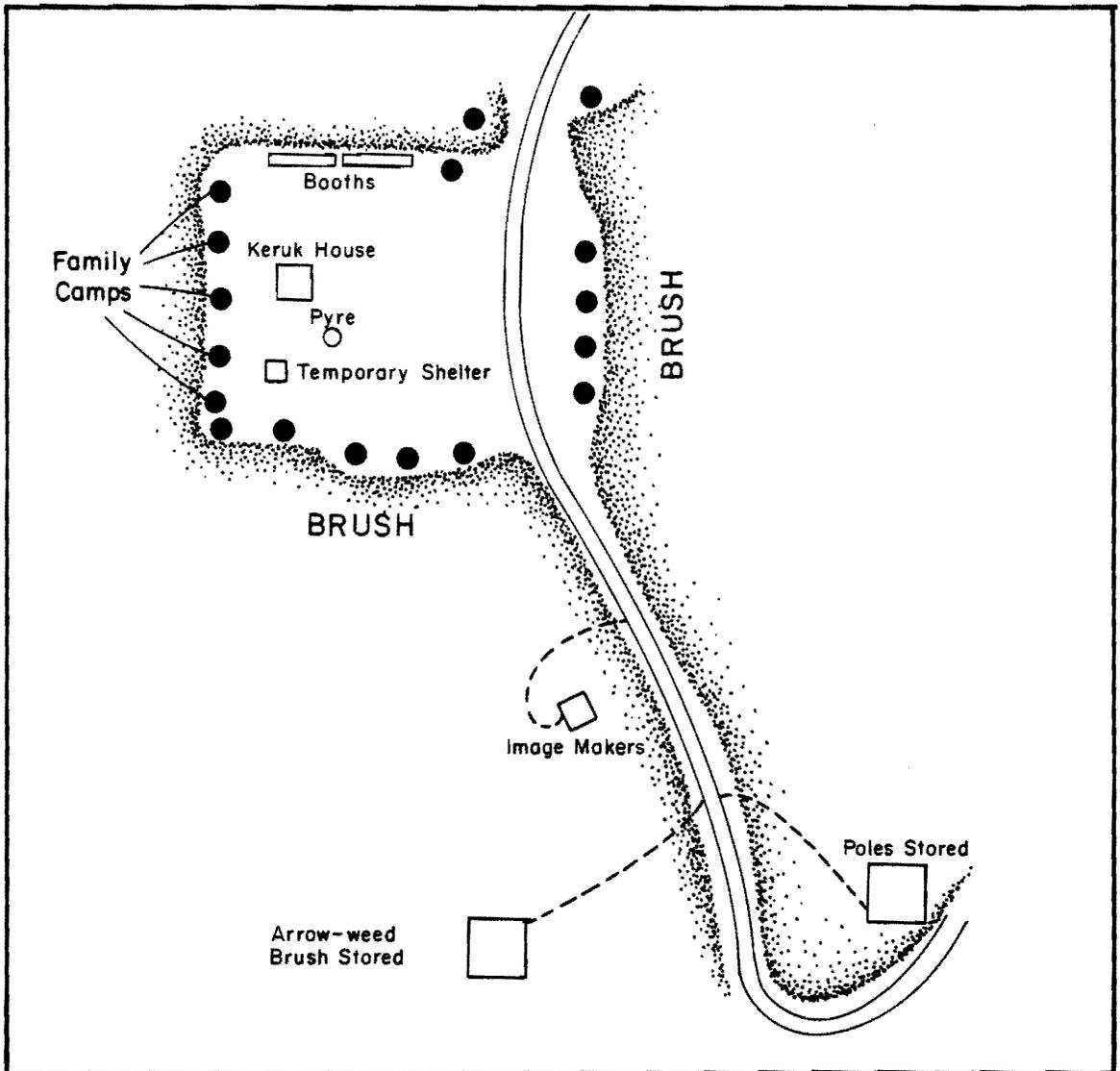


Figure 2. Map of spatial layout of an ethnographic *Keruk* (redrawn from Forde 1931:Figure 10).

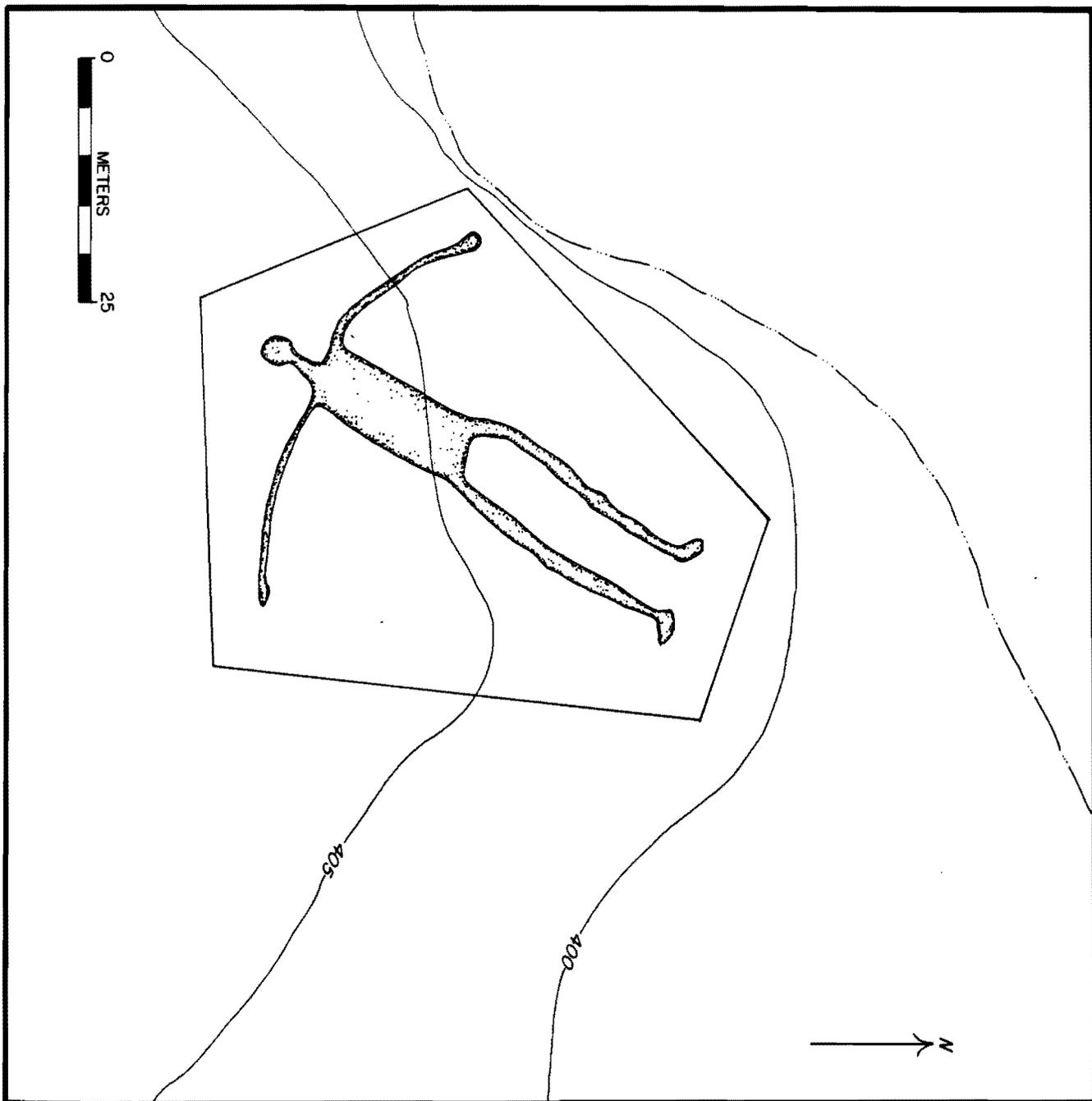


Figure 3. Anthropomorphic intaglio at RIV-14, near Blythe, California (from Ezzo 1994:Figure 47).

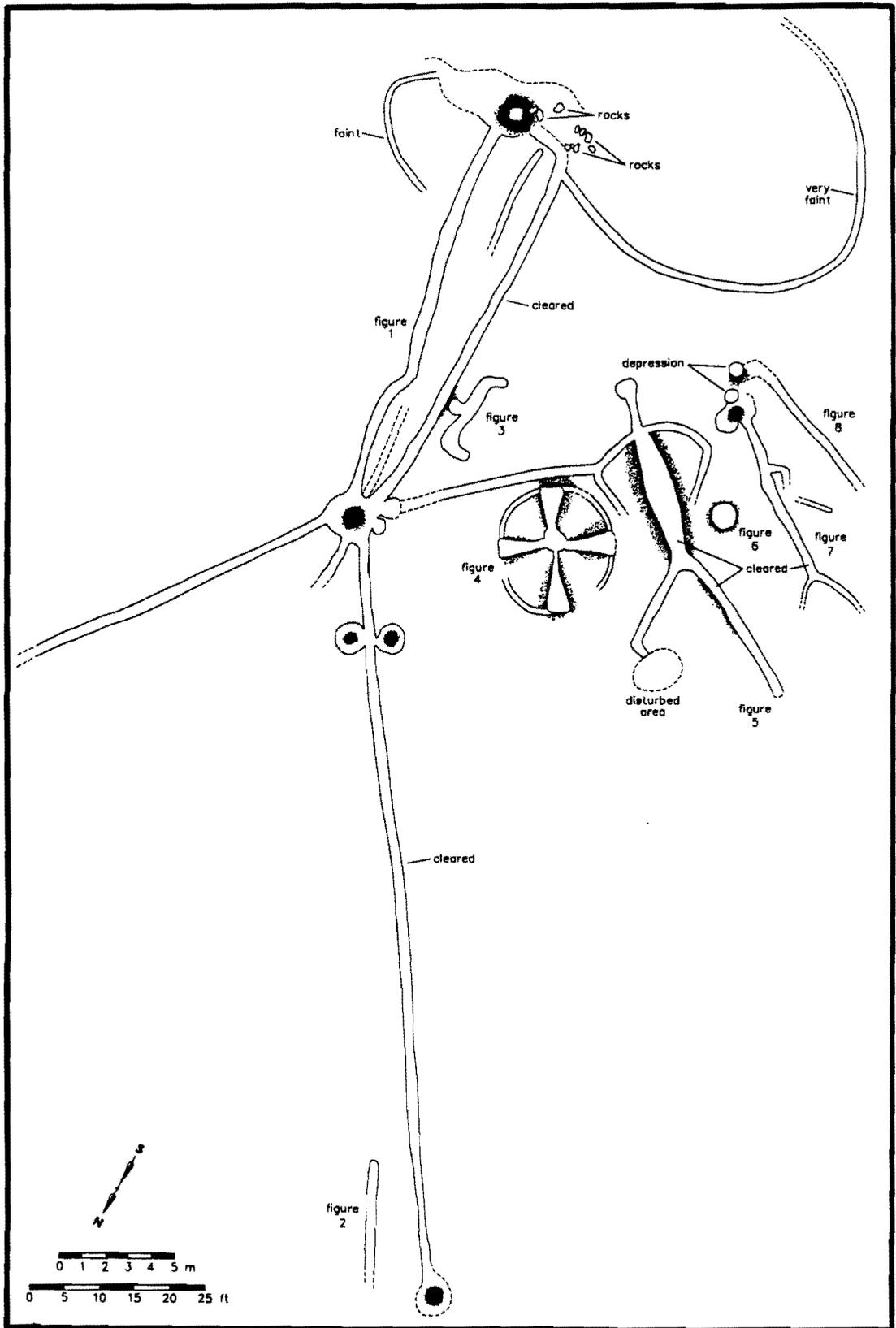


Figure 4. Anthropomorphic intaglio at Ripley (from Holmlund 1993:Figure 11).

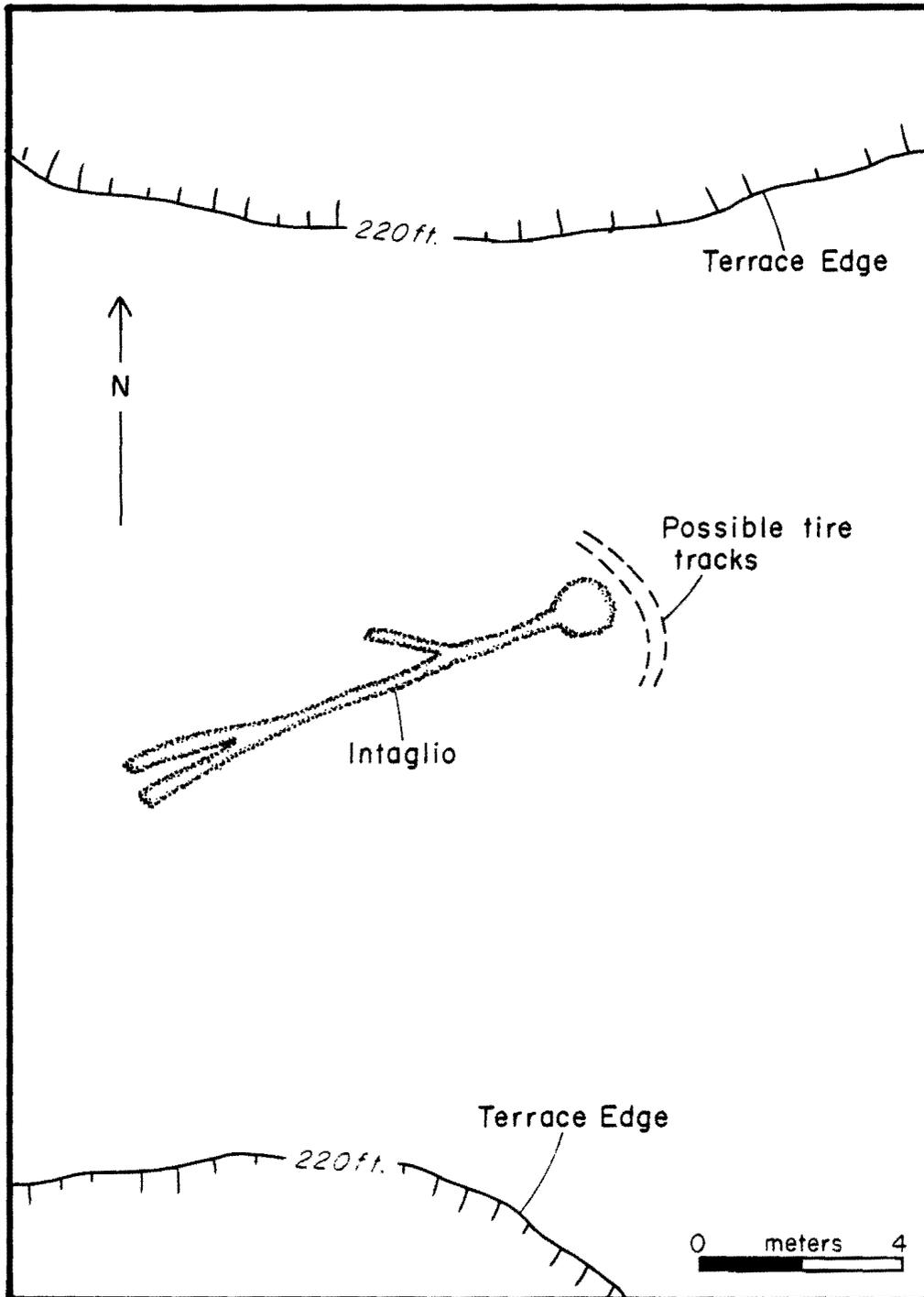


Figure 5. Anthropomorphic intaglio at 4-IMP-6950, Pilot Knob
(from Ezzo and Altschul 1993, Part 3:Figure 26).

Because warfare involved the usurpation of enemy lands, establishing and defending one's territory had to be of utmost importance. It makes sense, therefore, that groups would "mark" their land in a manner that would reflect a distinct style, but would carry iconographic meaning (depictions of the creator, for example) that everyone living along the river would understand. If this hypothesis is correct, then intaglio styles within specific tribal territories should be more similar to one another and contrast as a group with stylistic clusters in other regions.

The third aspect concerns the performance of the rituals. Shared ideological features of the *keruk* have been documented throughout western Arizona, southern Nevada, and southern California. We have argued that much of the geographical spread was the result of warfare with groups such as the Halchidhoma, who, after being forced from the river, continued to practice the *keruk*. We expect that centers near the heartland of the Yuman *keruk*, such as Pilot Knob and Ripley, would have the greatest ritual elaboration, with areas to the east and west practicing attenuated forms that have been combined with local ritual. Even though local styles developed, the associated ritual practices and ideology were largely shared.

SUMMARY

In summary, we have attempted to infer behavioral functions of ceremonial features along the Lower Colorado River by placing them into a historical context of antagonistic relations between neighboring groups. We have considered the variability in intaglio styles from the standpoint of restrictive sharing of cultural information (warfare as a cultural barrier) and a more intensive flow of cultural information (warfare or ritual as an integrating mechanism). Both processes are likely at work here. Intaglio styles probably vary as a result of restrictive movement of information, thus promoting group identity and a sense of territoriality, yet the rituals and sacred knowledge attendant upon the intaglios are held in common by all groups, suggesting that ritual served as a

mechanism of integration.

There is much we can never understand about intaglios. What did they mean? Why were they built? And who were they made for? But while we can only gaze with wonder at the imagery and beauty of the features, it is important to remember that archaeology can play a role in interpreting them. By placing intaglios in a larger cultural context, we can show the dynamic nature of the symbols and the changing behaviors that are associated with them.

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