

## ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEXICALI DESERT

OSWALDO CUADRA GUTIÉRREZ

Translated from Spanish by Don Laylander

*In October 2003, a survey was initiated for the 02-MXL-02-FIARUM Mexicali Road project with the intention of providing systematic coverage of the area. This survey focused on the search for archaeological remains. In this conference, we will present the results of new data and possible interpretations for the reconstruction of the prehistoric past and the colonial period in the north of Baja California, in particular in the delta of the Colorado River.*

The archaeology of northern Mexico, particularly that of the state of Baja California, has suffered from a lack of support and participation on the part of Mexican investigators. As a result, and because of the geographical and cultural characteristics that we share with the neighboring states of California and Arizona, it has been U.S. investigators who have written important studies of our region and contributed to the shaping of Baja California's past.

Thanks of the interest of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in Baja California and the assistance afforded by the Mexicali-La Rumorosa Highway Trust, the project known as "Mexicali Bypass 02-MXL-02-FIARUM" was presented to INAH's Council of Archaeology in Mexico City, with the aim of carrying out a systematic surface survey of the first 20 km of dirt road.

The objective was to identify and record archaeological areas that might be affected by the construction of the highway, and as a result, 29 potential locations for the study of the prehistory of northern Mexico and the southern United States were found.

The study area is located in Mexican territory, within the *municipio* of Mexicali, the capital of the state of Baja California. It lies to the west of Mexicali Valley, on the margins of the Colorado River delta's coastal plain. To the south and west are the Sierra Cucapá, a natural extension of the California cordillera, whose alluvial terraces are formed by granite, schist, and limestone. To the northwest is Centinela (Signal Mountain). To the north lies the state of California, with its continuation of the plain into Imperial Valley, and to the northeast and east respectively are the city of Mexicali and areas of agricultural fields or *ejidos*.

A total of 29 sites was located, in an area 20 km long and 500 m wide. As a first approximation, these can be divided into zones A and B on the basis of their different geographical and archaeological characteristics (Figure 1).

Zone A includes the first eight sites, scattered on the terraces along the margin of the Sierra Cucapá, a rocky area with little vegetation. In that area can be seen the familiar sleeping circles, recognized at a glance by their interiors of fine gravel or sand contrasting with the surrounding desert pavement (the layer of patinated rock or gravel covering the desert surface). The circles are also clearly distinguished by being bordered by rocks of various sizes. Their dimensions range from 50 cm to 1.4 or 2 m in diameter, and in most cases a large circle is associated with a small one.

These characteristics are similar to those described in the eighteenth century by the Jesuit missionary Johann Jakob Baegert, who was stationed at the mission of San Luis Gonzaga. Baegert (1772) reported that the Pericú and Guaycura Indians did not have permanent camps and that it was very rare for them to stay more than three nights in a row at the same location. They slept together in "sleeping circles," behind low walls that were hastily improvised to protect them from the cold.

Malcolm Rogers (1966) states that some of the circles may have been made thousands of years ago by early hunter-gatherers. Some appear as small areas that have simply been cleared of gravel, while others would seem to have been demarcated by rocks of diverse sizes with the aim of providing some sort of protection against the wind, as described in the accounts of

Venegas (1757) and Clavigero (1787). Both types of circles belong to the same time period, according to Rogers (1966:45), and their construction and distribution were governed by the natural characteristics of the terrain in which they are found.

Also observed are “trails,” which are distinguishable from the surrounding desert pavement because their interiors are tamped and their margins have aligned rocks. They trace routes that have interruptions in their trajectories and do not appear to lead anywhere. These features have also been termed “geoglyphs.”

Collected lithic materials amounted to 61 specimens, including flakes, scrapers, cutting tools, cores, and large hammerstones; these have a well-developed desert patina. No pottery was found, with the exception of two potsherds at the “El Taller” site, which do not constitute sufficient evidence to link ceramics with the sites. Based on the absence of this material in substantial quantities, it is thought that the sites of this zone are earlier in time.

Zone B consists of the remaining 21 sites found during the survey. They are located in the low portion of the coastal plain, in a sandy area with abundant vegetation. The zone is characterized by open encampments, possibly used for seasonal settlement or during travel. This is attested by areas yielding a collection of 237 lithic items and 736 potsherds. This zone is possibly later in date, based on the large amounts of ceramics and of lithics lacking desert patina.

The most important sites, because of their large quantity of archaeological material, are “Los Morros” and “Dunas.” At the latter can be seen the largest concentration of archaeological elements in a single site, which suggests that it was occupied by a large group or by several groups at one time.

In the collected ceramics can be observed different colors, types of paste, surface finishes, and shapes, but what is most striking is the decorated vessel rims and mouths on some pieces (Figure 2). Additionally, we are awaiting the results of an analysis of an obsidian point to

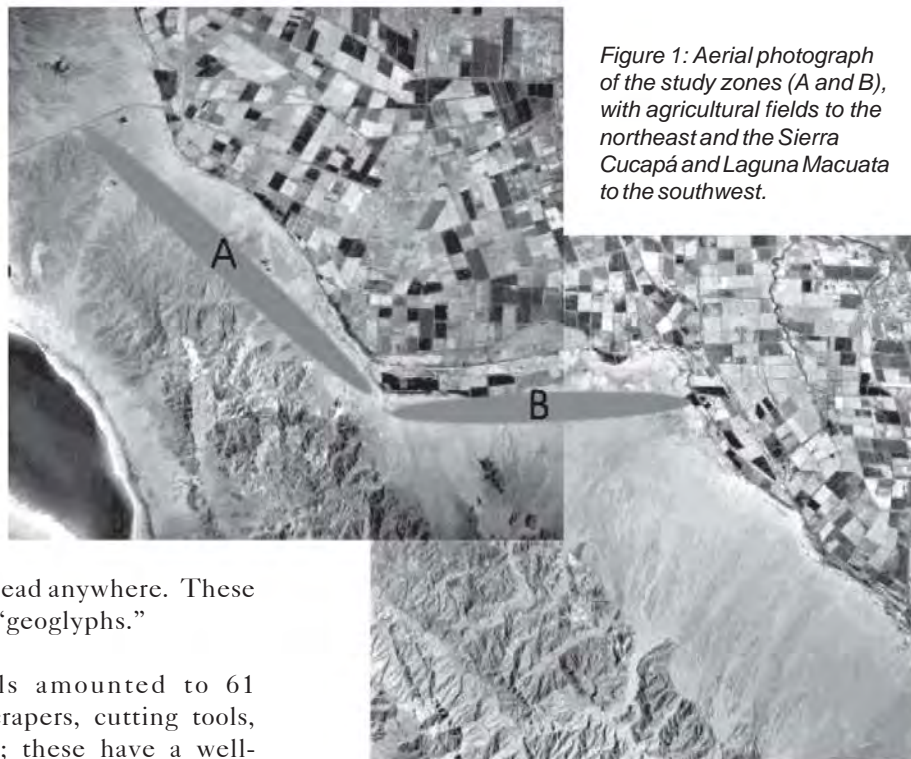


Figure 1: Aerial photograph of the study zones (A and B), with agricultural fields to the northeast and the Sierra Cucapá and Laguna Macuata to the southwest.

identify its source (Figure 3). Other items encountered in zone B were 18 pieces of marine and freshwater shell, shell and rock beads, and what appears to be a bone awl.

### CONCLUSION

As was stated, the objective of the project was to recover all of the archaeological evidence that might be affected by the construction of the bypass highway, as well as to make an initial assessment of the occupations by human groups that once lived in the region. It was concluded that in most cases these settlements may have been seasonal or travel camps or workshops, and that they may have been used during the Archaic period in the case of zone A and during the Late Prehistoric period in zone B.

An important beginning has been made by INAH-BC in creating agreements with the state government, *municipios*, private businesses as in this case with the Mexicali-La Rumorosa Highway Trust (FIARUM), and the community, with the aim of working together to preserve and conserve our patrimony and thus to generate future studies that may help to create a link in identity with the past.

.....



Figure 2: Decorated ceramic rim sherds (pictures by Oswaldo Cuadra Gutiérrez).

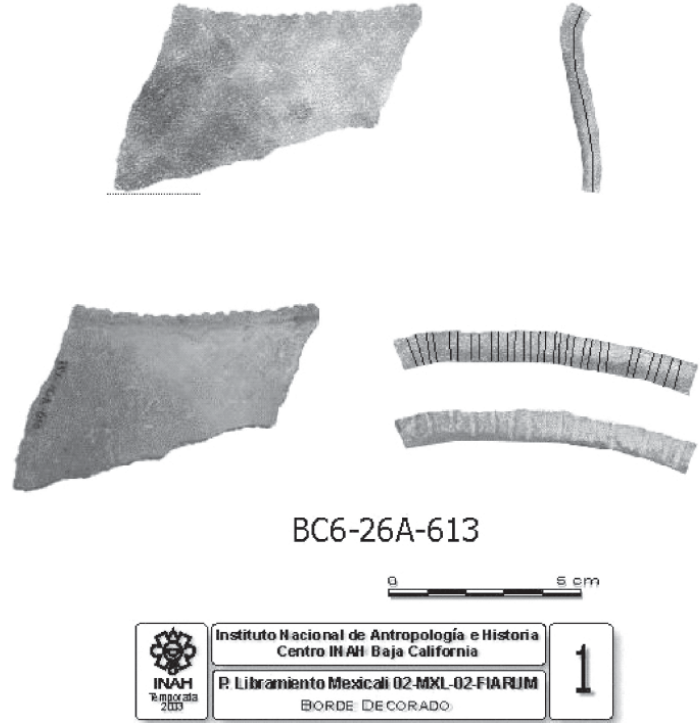


Figure 3: Arrow point (picture by Oswaldo Cuadra Gutiérrez).



Dibujo: Oswaldo Cuadra Gutiérrez

## REFERENCES CITED

Baegert, Johann Jakob

1772 *Nachrichten von der Amerikanischen Halbinsel Californien: mit einem zweyfachen Anhang falscher Nachrichten.* Churfürstl. Hof- und Academiebuchdruckerey, Mannheim, Germany.

Clavigero, Francisco Javier

1789 *Storia della California.* 2 vols. Appresso Modesto Penzo, Venice, Italy.

Rogers, Malcolm J.

1966 *Ancient Hunters of the Far West.* Union-Tribune Publishing, San Diego.

Venegas, Miguel

1757 *Noticia de la California y de su conquista temporal, y espiritual hasta el tiempo presente.* 3 vols. M. Fernández, Madrid.