

# ***Baja California Sur, Mexico: A Natural Laboratory for Forager Mortuary Archaeology***

Larae Brown and Ann M. Raab

## **Abstract**

Mortuary studies provide archaeologists with a wide variety of information about prehistoric peoples, their culture and their environment. In this paper, it is proposed that Baja California Sur, Mexico, with its significant amount of burial data, has the potential to contribute greatly to the understanding of forager mortuary variability. We propose avenues for further research, suggesting ways that Baja California Sur mortuary data might contribute fruitfully not only to our understanding of regional prehistory but also to the role of mortuary studies in the investigation of forager cultures in general.

## **Introduction**

We argue in this discussion that Baja California Sur (BCS), Mexico, the southernmost of the two states that occupy the Baja peninsula, is a natural laboratory for the emerging field of forager mortuary studies in archaeology. The first part of our discussion briefly summarizes the important role that burial data have always played in understanding prehistoric societies, and how such studies are increasingly advanced by the study of foraging (hunter-gatherer-fisher) peoples. Secondly, we summarize the critical impact that mortuary studies have had on the development of BCS archaeology, emphasizing the region's many

natural advantages for this type of research. Finally, we conclude this paper with suggestions for future research in BCS, emphasizing the great potential of burial research to advance our understanding of regional prehistory and the role of mortuary studies in the investigation of forager cultures across many time periods and regions.

Research in human burials can provide a wide variety of information about prehistoric people, their culture and their environment. In some cases mortuary analysis provides the bulk of information with which archaeologists develop their understanding of ancient societies. The variability in a society's treatment of the dead provides insight into the variability and social conditions of the living. The skeletal remains themselves present a record of growth and development, diet, exposure to disease, violence, and work-related trauma as well as other important dimensions of culture. In addition, associated grave goods can present a detailed chronology of artifact types and create a picture of prehistoric economy and social structure. However, despite the vast potential, mortuary

studies continue to present archaeologists with theoretical and methodological challenges.

### **Mortuary Archaeology and Foragers**

Long before the rise of professional archaeology at the close of the 19th century, antiquarians, travelers and the general public were fascinated with ancient cemeteries and monuments containing burials. To the extent that early archaeologists sought to interpret the cultural significance of burials, their theories often appealed to the “psychic unity of man” in which, for example, grave goods might be viewed as evidence of a belief in life after death or a striving for status among the living. More pragmatically, burials were often targeted as repositories for museum-grade artifacts. By the early 20th century, one of archaeology’s most important scientific paradigms, culture history, was on the rise, viewing burials as material culture traits important to reconstructing ancient cultures. Binford (1971:9) summarized the logic underlying this view, stating “the degree of formal similarity observed among independent sociocultural units is a direct measure of the degree of genetic or affiliational cultural relationship among the units being compared.”

After the mid-20th century, this picture changed dramatically. With the emergence of the New (Processual) Archaeology, methods were sought that could more reliably link mortuary remains to cultural patterning. These studies emphasized the relationship between burial practices and social organization, social status, gender roles, ideation and other cultural patterns. The search for cross-cultural patterns of mortuary behavior was a prominent aspect of this approach. Along these lines, Binford (1971), using 40 cross-cultural cases (historical and modern), postulated that the social persona of the deceased (as reflected in funerary ritual) tended to vary according to how

the person was situated in the social order in life. In his influential Ph.D. dissertation, Arthur Saxe (1970), proposed testable hypotheses regarding the relationship between mortuary behavior and social structure. Along similar lines, Brown (1971) compared North American Indian ethnographic descriptions of mortuary practices to archaeological remains, gaining considerable support for the New Archaeology’s approach to mortuary studies. Although the Binford-Saxe-Brown approach attracted critics (e.g., Hodder 1980, 1982; O’Shea 1984), it laid the theoretical groundwork for a generation of mortuary studies.

It should be noted, however, that the most successful studies of mortuary archaeology pertained to relatively complex societies, such as the chiefdoms of Bronze and Iron Age Europe (e.g., Chapman 1981; O’Shea 1995; Hodson 1977), Formative cultures of the American Southwest and Southeast (e.g., Hill 1970; Brown 1971), and the Maya of ancient Mesoamerica (Ruz Lhuillier 1968). In North America, a good deal of this work has centered on the Woodland and Mississippian traditions. In the former, for example, Goldstein’s (1995:114-115) work focuses on the social dynamics behind Woodland mound burials, where she notes that:

The nature of disposal types suggests interments are not generally primary; in addition to the popularity of bundle burials, the excavating archaeologist often notes that the flexed interments seem so tightly flexed that they may have been bound and reburied from another location... The scattered bone may represent the remnants of another form of mortuary processing, and the number of multiple burials also suggests that replacement in the mounds may be something other than primary interment.

Studies of this kind suggest that complex dynamics may have existed behind burial practices, beyond simply differentials of status or descent. These sorts of patterns, which have been described in other archaeological contexts (Beck 1995), may also involve sequences of body treatment, territoriality, and other factors.

Foraging societies were conspicuous by their absence from the revolution in mortuary studies. In an historical perspective, this omission is perhaps not surprising. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, archaeologists frequently viewed foragers as the starting point of cultural evolution, leaving foragers with little claim to social complexity or other interesting cultural traits that might be revealed by mortuary analysis. Even with the resurgence of forager studies in the 1960s, as reflected in the themes of the revolutionary *Man the Hunter* (Lee and Devore 1968) volume, the stereotypes remained of egalitarian, residentially mobile foragers uninterested in property rights, status striving, territoriality or other traits associated with chiefdoms or states. With such biases firmly in place, there appeared to be relatively little to learn about the mortuary customs of foragers, apart perhaps from insights into magico-religious behaviors.

In the meantime, forager studies have undergone dramatic change in the last two decades. Ground-breaking works such as the *Foraging Spectrum* (Kelly 1995) argue that the world-wide spectrum of hunter-gatherer societies cannot be confined to simple stereotypes, but rather exhibit features that were once attributed exclusively to “complex societies,” including status hierarchies, significant divisions of labor, and claims to property rights and territory. There are also empirical reasons to suspect that foragers were associated with more elaborate mortuary dynamics than previously suspected, and these dynamics extend deep into

the past. For instance, Morse and Morse (1983) describe what appears to be an early Archaic stage (Dalton) cemetery (ca. 10,000 years BP), containing caches of large, extraordinarily well made projectile points of materials imported from relatively distant regions. Charles and Buikstra (1983) describe middle Holocene cemeteries in the American Midwest, dating millennia before the mounds studied by Goldstein. In all, these studies suggest a far more complex picture of forager mortuary dynamics than traditionally supposed.

These new perspectives on forager anthropology open up new possibilities for mortuary archaeology. At least since the advent of biologically modern humans and the deliberate burial of the dead during the Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition (e.g., Defleur 1993; Hayden 1993; Trinkhaus 1983, 1985) it appears that no human societies were ever “simple” enough to exclude culturally significant variation in mortuary behavior. A consensus appears to be emerging that burial studies, once deployed largely in the service of understanding “complex societies,” can profitably be directed at understanding the considerable cultural variation that once existed in forager cultures.

### **A Natural Laboratory for Forger Mortuary Studies**

Occupying the “dry tropics,” the Cape Region of BCS, defined here as roughly the area between La Paz and Cabo San Lucas, is a land that many perceive as a desert surrounded by the sea. This perception is accurate in so far as aridity and high average temperatures shape the region’s distinctive terrestrial flora and fauna (Hyland 1997). In reality, the Cape Region of BCS exhibits a great deal of variation in moisture, temperature and biota, especially in relation to altitude. Just the same, this region at the time of European contact (1533) contained ostensibly some of the simplest and most

isolated foragers of the New World (Aschmann 1959).

While mainland Mexico was home to numerous state-level societies, the native peoples, occupying the southern half of the Baja California peninsula, possessed none of the distinguishing characteristics of ancient Mesoamerica, including agriculture, pottery production, hieroglyphic writing, or other trappings of civilization. The ancestors of historic groups such as the Guaycura and Pericú were foragers who, based on current information, subsisted in comparatively small, flexible social units, exploiting a range of terrestrial and marine food resources in seasonal rounds of settlement (Reygadas Dahl and Velázquez Ramírez 1983; Rosales-López and Fujita 2000). Moreover, the evidence suggests that these groups likely developed over centuries, perhaps millennia, in relative isolation from other parts of North America. Based on these characterizations, the Pericú and other groups of peninsular California might well be grouped with aborigines of Australia's Western Desert, the celebrated Kung! of the Kalahari Desert and Shoshonean peoples of the American Great Basin as some of the world's "simplest" foragers.

Things may not have been as simple as they might seem, however. Archaeological research on BCS was drawn from the beginning to the region's mortuary sites. These studies began with Herman ten Kate's discovery of funerary caves in 1883 (Tyson 1977). The burials found in these caves, including well-preserved primary and secondary interments with hyper-dolichocranic (high-vaulted) skulls, attracted the attention of early scholars, such as Belding (1885), Diguët (1973), and Rivet (1909). However, William C. Massey (1947, 1949, 1953) is credited with initiating modern archaeological inquiry in Baja California Sur.

The principal product of Massey's research was a definition of the late prehistoric Las Palmas Culture, resting on his excavation of three dry cave sites in the area of Las Palmas Bay. Massey (1966:47) maintained that Cerro Cuevoso Cave (BC 75), Punta Pescadero (BC 111) and Piedra Gorda (BC 114) were used exclusively for the interment of Las Palmas peoples. Each cave produced at least one primary burial; however, the "Burial practices of the people using these caves consisted chiefly of depositing bound bundles of the defleshed bones of the dead, which had been painted with red ochre... These secondary burials were usually covered with deer skins or palm fronds and accompanied by artifacts" (Massey 1966:49). Massey (1966) identified a set of diagnostic artifacts (round-shafted wooden dart throwers, lark's-head netting, sewn palm-bark containers, and wooden lozenge-shaped hardwood tablas) that were closely associated with this Las Palmas Culture, but the particulars of the burial style were certainly the main focus of his work.

Recently, Rosales-López and Fujita (2000) have reported a coastal cemetery at El Conchalito on the Bay of La Paz. While Massey's description of the Las Palmas mortuary tradition was based on data from dry caves, the El Conchalito burials derive from a littoral environment, producing the highest number of burials in the region. Of particular interest here is the similarity in burial types with those found in Massey's caves. At El Conchalito, we find both primary and secondary burials, including secondary bundle burials. The potential for cross-comparison between these two sites is compelling, to say the least.

As we can see from the above, burial data have been recovered from dry (caves) and wet (littoral) settings, both offering significant access to mortuary data. Other factors also condition the state

of regional archaeological preservation in BCS, at least as compared to many other areas in North America. Until the 1970s and the construction of the trans-peninsular highway, much of the Baja Peninsula was inaccessible to motor traffic. Perhaps because of this relative isolation or perhaps because of the lure of complex civilizations elsewhere in Mexico, archaeologically, the Cape Region remains one of the most under-studied regions in all of North America. However, since the 1970s, Baja California Sur has become one of Mexico's fastest developing states. This enormous growth, particularly in the tourist industry, has led to a subsequent boom in construction which threatens to destroy many archaeological sites, especially along the coast. Despite this, many well preserved sites are still undisturbed by urban intrusion and are awaiting archaeological reconnaissance. As a natural laboratory for forager cultural adaptation, southern Baja offers some unique advantages.

All of these factors make BCS a natural laboratory for the study of forager cultural adaptations, accessible to a significant degree through mortuary archaeology. Anthropology and archaeology have come a long way in our understanding of hunter-gatherer social relations. No longer guided by rigid notions of socioeconomic simplicity, egalitarianism and free-roaming land tenure, we can now hypothesize that some of the same forces at work in more complex societies are also at work among hunter-gatherer-fisher peoples. We know that an absence of marked social stratification does not necessarily mean members of foraging groups shared equal status or had no interest in controlling territory. On this account, we see no reason why the arsenal of theories and techniques developed for the study of relatively complex cultures, such as the Binford-Saxe-Brown approach, as well as more recent techniques, cannot be applied to groups such as we find in BCS.

### **Modeling Regional Mortuary Patterns**

To date, mortuary research in BCS has tended to be site specific, rather than a search for regional patterns. Although Massey's Las Palmas Culture was certainly aimed at defining regional patterns, his ideas nevertheless remained largely a product of the data he obtained from dry caves. The recent work at the El Conchalito site expands our data on burial patterns, some of which appear to overlap in time with Massey's cave burials (Carman and Molto 1991). All of these data remain to be assessed fully in a regional perspective. While the space available here does not permit us to explore fully such perspectives, we can suggest that robust, late prehistoric mortuary traits were shared across the region (Table 1). While this information is certainly only a starting point, and in no way should be considered exhaustive, it helps to paint the beginnings of an interesting regional portrait. Shared burial traits across the region warrant further investigation. It seems clear that we now have enough information to suggest a move from site-specific studies to regional analysis.

So what are the research potentials for the area, based on this information? What can we make of existing patterns? In the following section, we explore some of the possibilities, specifically within the context of burial stages, fear of the dead, status and territoriality.

### **Burial Stage Model**

As noted above, both primary and secondary burials have been found, including the intriguing sectioned (dismembered) burials. As shown in Table 1, burial types vary but overlap across the region. Various theories account for this variation, especially in relation to the secondary burials, some dating back to the beginning of archaeological study in

Table 1. Late prehistoric mortuary traits.

	Piedra Gorda (BC 114)	Punta Pescadero (BC 111)	Cerro Cuevoso (BC 75)	Los Frailes	La Salina
Cave	X	X	X		
Open-air/shell midden				X	X
Primary, extended	X			X	
Primary, flexed		X	X	X	
Secondary, flexed					
Secondary, sectioned (dismembered)	X				X
L-shaped					
Multiple burial					X
Cremation/Burning					
Disarticulated bones	X	X	X		
Red pigments	X	X	X		
Bindings or wrappings	X	X	X		
Grave goods	X	X	X	X	
Grave furniture	X				
Lithics/stone tools					
Shells					
Animal remains					
Seed/plant remains					
Radiocarbon dates on human bone	Approx. AD 1300 – 1650 (possibly as early as AD 1050 and as late as AD 1700s)				

\* La Mantacita was not scientifically excavated.

the area. Diguet (1973), the early French chemist/explorer, suggested that secondary burials were of a temporary nature, based on how the bones were bundled (cranium, pelvis and vertebrae, wrapped in palm leaves). Diguet (1973) proposed that such bundles were waiting to be moved to another place for reburial. In more recent years, Carmean and Molto (1991) have also suggested a burial stage model. In summary, they determined that most of the Las Palmas population could not be represented in just the burial caves themselves. Carmean and Molto (1991) reasoned that these represented an unreasonably low population number. They proposed a series of burial stages, wherein individuals could be buried in open-air/shell

midden sites during times when “microbands” were separated, most likely related to seasonal patterns of hunting and foraging; the cave burials could then be carried out by the convergence of these microbands.

Tuohy and Van Wormer (1995) propose secondary burials may have resulted when primary burials were accidentally re-exposed through natural processes, thus necessitating specialized treatment. While we recognize this as a possibility, the consistency and purposive nature of burials, in particular the sectioned (dismembered) burials, seems to suggest that the secondary burials were part of a regular pattern of behavior, rather than the result of random episodes of natural disinterment.

Table 1 (continued from left). Late prehistoric mortuary traits.

	El Medano	Barco Verado I	Barco Verado II	La Mantacita*	El Conchalito
Cave				X	
Open-air/shell midden	X	X	X		X
Primary, extended				X?	X
Primary, flexed	X	X	X	X?	X
Secondary, flexed					X
Secondary, sectioned (dismembered)					X
L-shaped					X
Multiple burial			X		
Cremation/Burning				X	
Disarticulated bones				X	X
Red pigments				X	X
Bindings or wrappings				X	
Grave goods	X			X	X
Grave furniture					X
Lithics/stone tools	X	X	X		
Shells	X				
Animal remains	X				
Seed/plant remains	X				
Radiocarbon dates on human bone				Between AD 1451 - 1633	

The burial stage model seems worthy of continued consideration, but the causes behind it need to be better understood.

### Fear of the Dead

There are indications that death and ancestors may have played an important role in the lives of the native inhabitants in the Cape Region. Hyland (1997) defines a pan-peninsular ceremonial complex which emphasizes death-related ceremonies and revolves around communication with the dead and veneration of lineage ancestors. According to Hyland (1997:347), “The most essential features of this complex are

communication with the dead and reenactment of myth.” Hyland’s ideas are supported by ethnohistoric sources. Jesuit missionary Johann Baegert (1952:88) wrote, “One of them told me that his people had formerly broken the spine of the deceased before burying them, and had thrown them into the grave rolled up like a ball, insisting that they would rise up again if not treated in this barbaric manner.” This description may be supported by archaeological evidence at El Conchalito (Rosales-López and Fujita 2000) in the form of sectioned (dismembered) burials. What this does not explain, however, is why only certain individuals were treated in this manner, and why those sectioned (dismembered) individuals were

partially defleshed before burial. While the beliefs described by Baegert may have existed, they do not explain the full range of variability observed in the region.

### Status

The differences in grave construction, the energy involved in disposition of the dead, and funerary items may reflect status differences. While the notion of status typically is not ascribed to band-level societies, aspects of mortuary behavior among prehistoric BCS peoples may suggest otherwise. Treatment of the dead among BCS individuals exhibits variability, both on artifacts and disposition of the dead. Interment ranges from simple primary and flexed burials to more elaborate secondary burials described by Rosales-López and Fujita (2000) and Massey (1966). Some years ago, Massey (1955:276) posited that preparation of the region's renowned ochre-painted secondary burials reflected shamanic specialization. According to Stewart, Molto, and Reimer (1998:6),

Massey reasoned that the primary burials represented statused members of Las Palmas society, since these burials generally were accompanied by the most grave goods, including many items of presumed high status. This is illustrated by Massey's description of Burial 1 (B1), a young adult female from his large cave site, BC 114.

There are notable differences in the quantity and quality of artifacts associated with BCS burials, ranging from unshaped quartz pebbles found at El Conchalito to worked-bone and shell, cordage, and artifacts made of palm bark found by Massey at Las Palmas Bay. More recently, Reygadas Dahl and González Barba (2003) reported on an adult male cranium adorned with shark-teeth inlays, providing

possible evidence of social distinctions among ancient El Conchalito populations.

### Burial and Territoriality

In recent decades, a number of analysts have concluded that mortuary practices can be convincingly linked to ideas of territoriality in hunter/gatherer groups. Saxe (1970), for example, hypothesized a link between corporate groups, critical resources and formal disposal areas for the dead in cemeteries. This hypothesis was later refined and expanded by Goldstein (1981) who, relying on ethnographic data from a cross-cultural sample, found a link between the exclusivity of formal disposal areas and group structure in the form of lineal decent systems. Saxe and Goldstein's work demonstrates that formal disposal areas not only legitimize control of critical resources but they may also do so through lineal descent from the ancestors buried within them. Following Saxe (1970) and Goldstein (1981, 1995), Chapman (1981:80) has argued that cemeteries or other formal disposal areas emerge during "periods of imbalance between society and critical resources." Although there can be various causes for this imbalance, including increased competition for resources, the results are the same: societies find new ways to control access to vital resources. Chapman (1981:80) suggests that the mortuary tradition represented by the European megaliths symbolizes a "...permanent claim to the use and control of critical resources [which] is established by the presence of the ancestors." While Chapman refers to a European example, similar arguments have been advanced for forager groups as well (Charles and Buikstra 1983).

In terms of the Las Palmas Culture, there are three factors to consider. One is whether disposal areas are situated in the vicinity of critical resources. The ocean and its abundance of food sources were

clearly critical to the prehistoric people of the Cape Region. Archaeological investigation at the coastal site of El Conchalito attests to the wide variety of subsistence resources available such as fish, several species of shellfish, marine as well terrestrial mammals, plants, and perhaps most importantly a reliable perennial source of water (Rosales-López and Fujita 2000; Fujita 1995). Rosales-López and Fujita (2000) have suggested that these factors may have resulted in intensive site use.

A second consideration is archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence for conflict. Although the native inhabitants of BCS, decimated by European illnesses, were effectively extinct by the 18th century, there is still a rich body of ethnohistoric literature recorded by explorers, privateers and missionaries (Mathes 1992). These data provide eyewitness accounts regarding the natural environment and many aspects of aboriginal cultural practices such as diet, economy, settlement, warfare and mortuary practices. In the Cape Region, ethnohistoric sources do in fact assert frequent inter-group conflict between coastal inhabitants, including the off-shore islands and the inland Guaycura, neighbors of the Pericú (Mathes 1992:181). These conflicts usually resulted from territoriality and controlled access to food resources (Laylander 1987). The rock art of peninsular California also depicts people wounded by arrows, suggesting interpersonal violence (Hyland 1997). Hyland (1997) makes a case that the central peninsula contained territories symbolized by definable rock art styles.

The third factor to take into consideration is ancestral ties to the land. As mentioned above, there seems to be archaeological support for veneration of ancestors in the Cape Region. If Hyland's (1997) hypothesis can be generalized to the Cape Region, it may be reasonable to expect variation in rock art imagery to correlate with ancestral lineages

and specific places claimed by descent groups, such as major canyons or watersheds. He sees the rock art functioning as "...the demarcation of any real territories in an ecological sense" (Hyland 1997:394) and as a potential response to unwanted exploitation of a group's "owned" food resources by another group. Contrary to some notions of forager societies, these patterns suggest that prehistoric peninsular California was contested territory, with implications for mortuary patterning.

### Conclusions and Future Research

We believe that the foregoing shows that the Cape Region is a fruitful source of data on forager mortuary practices. Burial data are available from several preservation regimes, including dry and wet environments, allowing for regional analysis. The data currently available suggest that variable but patterned burial forms existed across preservation regimes, as shown in Table 1. Some of the most productive approaches to mortuary studies center on two hypotheses: (1) descent groups structure the burials, and (2) burial patterns may reflect territoriality, as seen in ossuaries or cemeteries like those in dry caves and at El Conchalito.

These hypotheses can be pursued in two key ways. First, conduct more thorough analyses of burial patterns in order to better characterize variation in various mortuary patterns, including primary and secondary burials, and transport of burials to central burial locations. The data available from Massey's research and at El Conchalito suggest that research analogous to that described earlier by Goldstein (1995) would be profitable. If so, the analytical techniques that have proven profitable in understanding the mortuary dynamics of non-forager groups can be applied in the Cape Region. A key component of this analysis would also include radiocarbon dates. This would help to analyze not

only the temporal relationships within burial sites, but between burial sites as well.

The second key avenue of research is to determine measures of descent and kin affiliation through the use of DNA studies. These studies would seek to learn whether descent lines can be established within and/or across burial sites in the region. If, for example, prehistoric cemeteries received the dead of one or more descent groups, such patterns may become evident through the analysis of skeletal DNA. Geographical clusters defined by genetically similar individuals may be useful in evaluating the hypothesis that cemeteries were correlated with territories claimed by descent groups. More and subtle details of cultural patterns are also possible from such analyses, such as genetic differences between males and females that may reflect group endogamy or exogamy with regard to mate selection, post-marital residence and other patterns.

When these data are collated, we are confident that a more complete and reliable picture of the mortuary dynamics among ancient Baja California Sur peoples will be forthcoming. The studies mentioned above are intrinsically linked to advances in archaeological and paleoenvironmental inquiry. We are confident that on-going research in Baja California Sur will reveal considerable variability in past mortuary practices, enabling us to understand more fully the enigmatic and fascinating Las Palmas Culture.

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