

ARTIFACTS AND FEATURES MARKER ARTIFACTS

This article is one of an occasional series discussing matters archaeological. Last month we talked about qualitative techniques for establishing dates of archaeological sites and why such dates are important, and alluded to the use of marker artifacts. Today we continue with markers.

A marker artifact is any object made by humans which is distinctive to a time or a culture. We use marker artifacts all the time in our everyday life – when walking in the desert, when we find an aluminum beer can, we know someone has been there in the past few years. The aluminum beer can is a marker artifact. In archaeology there are a number of such classes of artifacts: projectile points, beads, ceramics, architectural style, basketry, cordage, and special-purpose items, all specific to a time and/or culture.

Projectile points are very useful, because the manufacture of points in the Great Basin was relatively conservative. Desert Side-Notched arrow points, for example, were only made in about the last 600 years, while Humboldt dart points were primarily made between 8,000 and 6,000 years ago. Point typology has been raised to a high art, because by classifying a point you gain an understanding of the chronology, especially if you can couple it with stratigraphy in a dig. Similar arguments can be made for beads, ceramics, etc. An expert on Puebloan pottery, for example, can examine a sherd and estimate age to within a century!

Unfortunately, perishable items such as basketry and cordage are often the most useful, but since they are perishable they do not often survive in open archaeological sites. This is why dry caves, such as Lovelock Cave and Gatecliff Shelter in Nevada and Danger Cave in Utah are so significant. Caves are environments in which perishables will survive, often for thousands of years. Further, basketry is very valuable because it typically is specific to a culture as well as to a time period, so identification of basketry, often mere fragments, provides clues on population movements.

There is another class of artifact which we have in abundance in this area: rock art. Although it is not often thought of in this light, it provides important chronological clues. A rock art image of a Model-T, for example, is guaranteed to be post-1920's, while a figure of a horseback rider is probably post 1850 in this area (this is dependent on area, of course; due to early Spanish contact in the Southwest, horseback rider images there may be older).

Images of weapons are very interesting in this context. The atlatl (dart thrower) and dart were the standard weapons in this area prior to about 1,800 years ago; at about that time the bow and arrow were introduced, as determined from several archaeological sites, notably Rose Spring near modern-day Haiwee Reservoir. Thus, any petroglyph image of a bow and arrow is less than 1,800 years old, which gives us valuable data both on the petroglyphs and on the sites where they are found.

Obviously, marker artifacts give only approximate dates, so given the availability of quantitative methods of dating, why do marker artifacts continue to be used? There are three reasons. First, they are quick and easy to use by a trained person. Second, they are low in cost, while quantitative testing is expensive. And third and most important, they provide corroborating evidence: if, for example, projectile point and bead typology give the same age ranges as the quantitative methods, the case is strengthened, while if they do not, they may point to some interesting phenomenon which would otherwise have been overlooked. Thus they continue to be a valuable part of how archaeology is done.

In our next column we will continue with discussion of quantitative chronological methods.