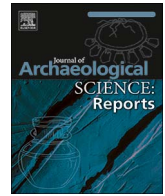




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## Imagining the cultural landscapes of Paleoindians

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## ABSTRACT

Archaeologists commonly use the geographic patterning of sourced artifacts to understand how prehistoric cultures used their landscapes, yet exactly what this patterning indicates remains unclear. The Paleoindian literature reflects a tendency to assume that toolstone conveyance reflects direct acquisition (i.e., mobility) motivated by subsistence and technological concerns, rather than acquisition (i.e., exchange) motivated by social concerns. This tendency demonstrates a willingness on the part of many archaeologists to imagine Paleoindians organized on a physical landscape defined by the location of important material resources (e.g., food, water, stone), but a hesitancy to imagine Paleoindians organized on a social landscape defined by the location of other people. Yet the challenge of actually distinguishing between mobility and exchange persists. Here, I offer some ideas that might help us make headway on the linkage problem we confront when attempting to infer mode of acquisition from patterns of toolstone conveyance, focusing on the North American Great Basin. I imagine a Paleoindian cultural landscape defined, not just by the distribution of food and non-food resources, but also other people, to propose that mobility and exchange both contributed to the patterns of toolstone conveyance we see, perhaps operating at different scales in relation to subsistence, technological, and social motivations.

Science...is not just a matter of making mistakes, but of making mistakes in public. Making mistakes for all to see, in the hopes of getting the others to help with the corrections.

–Daniel C. Dennett (1995:380).

## 1. Introduction

As Bird and Codding (2016:396) recently observed, “the most basic components of human life revolve around how we utilize landscapes.” In many regions of the world, archaeologists reconstruct landscape use by documenting the procurement and conveyance of resources. This is certainly true for lithic analysts, who commonly use the conveyance of stone from geologic-geographic origin to archaeological site to gain insight into lithic technological organization, mobility, and exchange (Hughes, 2011). Indeed, the geographic patterning of sourced artifacts provides archaeologists with a rich dataset from which we can infer seasonal procurement ranges, acquisition strategies, territorial boundaries, cultural toolstone preferences, and intergroup interaction (Skinner et al., 2004:227), providing fundamental insights into landscape use and sociocultural organization.

Despite these many alternatives, the tendency remains to interpret toolstone conveyance as a reflection of mobility. But those of us who focus on prehistoric hunter-gatherers usually do not mean just any type

of mobility. The literature suggests that most often we mean mobility motivated by subsistence or technological concerns, during which we expect that toolstone was directly obtained incidental to other foraging tasks (Kelly, 2011). The tendency seems to be to imagine prehistoric hunter-gatherers organized on a physical landscape defined by the location of important material resources (e.g., food, water, stone), rather than a social landscape defined by the location of other people. Or, as Bradley (1984:11) put it, “in the literature as a whole, successful farmers have social relations with one another, while hunter-gatherers have ecological relations with hazelnuts.” The utility of the landscape approach (Anschuetz et al., 2001), even if it is not always well-executed (Kowalewski, 2008), is that it allows us to recognize that physical and social resources are both part of a dynamic cultural landscape (e.g., Knapp and Ashmore, 1999; Whallon and Lovis, 2016).

The geographic patterning of sourced artifacts provides us with a dataset that we might be able to use to move beyond prehistoric hunter-gatherers’ “ecological relations with hazelnuts” to also consider prehistoric hunter-gatherers’ social relations with each other. As Kelly (2011:189–190) observed, “if material is acquired directly, then it is a measure of ‘territorial’ size; if not, then it is a measure of social, but not necessarily physical connections across a landscape.” Thus, the patterns of toolstone conveyance we so often interpret as motivated by subsistence or technological concerns may actually be motivated by social concerns (e.g., Eerkens, 2011:136–138). Our analytical challenge, as it

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has been for some time now, is: how do we tell the difference? The honest answer is I am not sure, but I do not think anyone else is either. Inferring mode of acquisition from toolstone conveyance is a long-standing middle-range problem (e.g., Hughes, 2011; Meltzer, 1984–85, 1989; Smith and Harvey, 2017-in this issue). Given our reliance on patterns of toolstone conveyance to understand how prehistoric populations organized themselves in relation to their landscape, its resources, and each other, resolution of this problem would be significant.

I will not pretend to have resolved this problem here. Instead, I offer a few ideas that might help us make some headway, focusing on the conveyance of toolstone across the North American Great Basin during the Terminal Pleistocene/Early Holocene (TP/EH). The areas circumscribed by obsidian conveyance have been interpreted to reflect the annual ranges of residentially-mobile Paleoindians (Jones et al., 2003, 2012; Smith, 2010), the logistical forays of semi-sedentary Paleoindians (Madsen, 2007), and Paleoindian lifetime ranges (Simms, 2008). Yet a comparison of these interpretations with ethnographic data reveals a problem of scale (i.e., size, after Wandsnider, 1998), as the areas circumscribed by obsidian conveyance are far larger than the areas used by modern hunter-gatherers (Kelly, 2011).

Many archaeologists will not find this discordance problematic, asserting that it simply confirms what has been repeated many times over in the literature: Paleoindians lack modern analogs. They may be right, but rather than dismiss this problem of scale, I suggest that obsidian conveyance may be telling us something different about how Paleoindians organized themselves on the landscape. I explore the possibility that long-distance obsidian conveyance reflects the areal extent of Paleoindian social networks maintained through “non-utilitarian mobility” (i.e., informational and network mobility, after Whallon, 2006) and exchange. If so, then the foraging ranges of Paleoindian groups may be reflected by the conveyance of toolstone over smaller areas. Imagining a Paleoindian cultural landscape that includes physical and social resources (i.e., other people), I propose that mobility and exchange both contributed to the patterns of toolstone conveyance we see, perhaps operating at different scales in relation to different motivations. I fully anticipate that some of the ideas I present here will prove incorrect. Yet I remain hopeful that making mistakes for all to see and getting others to help with the corrections may help us move toward a fuller understanding of Paleoindian lifeways.

## 2. Obsidian conveyance zones in the Great Basin

Extensive treatment of the paleoenvironmental and archaeological records of the Great Basin during the TP/EH is beyond the scope of this paper. For entry into this literature, I refer the interested reader to Grayson's (2011) thorough and engaging *The Great Basin: A Natural Prehistory*. Of particular relevance, it seems that much of the Great Basin was lush during the TP/EH than today, as increased moisture fed pluvial lakes that gave way to shallow lakes and marshes during the Early Holocene. These settings supported a variety of plant and animal species that Paleoindians used (Goebel et al., 2011). Thus, it is no coincidence that the earliest archaeological record for the region demonstrates an affinity for lake margins and marshes (Grayson 2011:292). Indeed, Beck and Jones (1997:172) have observed that effective moisture remained high in many parts of the Great Basin into the Early Holocene, supporting “expanses of shallow lakes and marshes, and flowing streams and springs [that] must have provided attractive habitats for exploitation until perhaps as late as about 8000 B.P.”

Exactly how Paleoindians would have incorporated these highly productive, though regionally and temporally variable, localities into their patterns of landscape use remains debated (e.g., Duke and King, 2014). As Smith et al. (2013) discuss, at least three strategies of Paleoindian landscape use have been proposed, each centered on the use of wetlands:

1. Paleoindians practiced high levels of residential mobility geared to

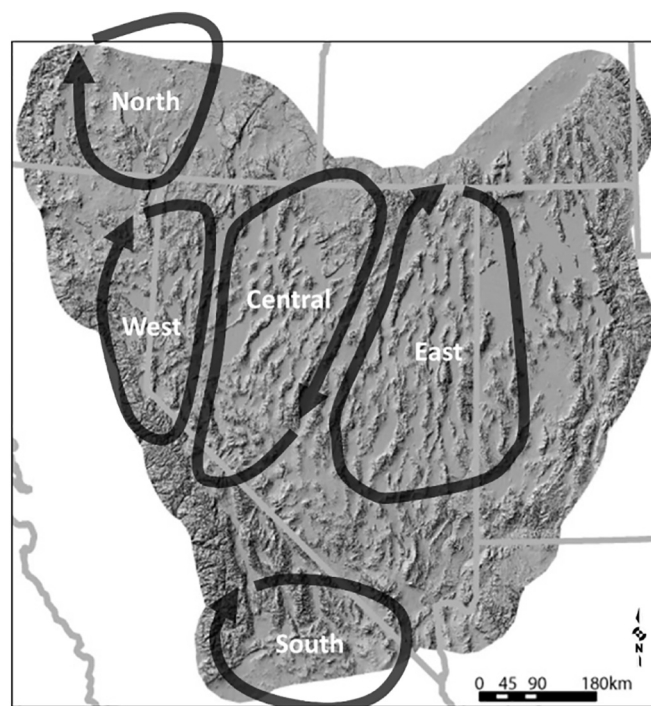


Fig. 1. Paleoindian obsidian conveyance zones. (Redrawn from Jones et al., 2003: Fig. 13).

wetlands (e.g., Jones et al., 2003).

2. Paleoindians practiced high levels of residential mobility between wetlands. Within wetland settings, mobility varied between men and women. Women engaged in foraging activities near marsh-side camps. Men engaged in logistical forays to hunt large game in low- and mid-elevation zones (e.g., Elston and Zeanah, 2002).
3. Paleoindians practiced semi-sedentism at large, productive wetlands (e.g., Madsen, 2007).

The different interpretations of obsidian conveyance reflect these alternatives.

Fifteen years ago, Jones et al. (2003) pulled together several obsidian provenance analyses from across the Great Basin to define a series of obsidian conveyance zones (OCZs; Fig. 1) that they suggested “delimit geographically the foraging territories” of Paleoindians. These obsidian provenance data delineate OCZs measuring roughly 450 km north-south and 150 km east-west in the eastern, central, and western Great Basin, stretched in accordance with the north-south trending mountain ranges. In the northern and southern Great Basin, where the mountains are less formidable, the OCZs are less elongated. Interestingly, there is little evidence for the movement of obsidian east-west between OCZs. Paleoindian sites in east-central Nevada, for example, lack artifacts made from western and northwestern Great Basin obsidian sources, even though some of these sources are no more distant (measured in a straight line) than the sources that dominate the assemblages. Jones et al. (2003:32) proposed that this pattern indicated a lack of interaction between peoples living within these OCZs, perhaps as a consequence of low population density and the tethering of Paleoindians to significant wetlands, which were less common in the central Great Basin than elsewhere in the region (Grayson, 2011). Based on these provenance data, Jones et al. (2003, 2012) and Beck and Jones (2011) concluded that Paleoindians were “travelers” (after Bettinger and Baumhoff, 1982). Operating in small groups under conditions of low population density, Paleoindians frequently moved from one resource-rich patch (e.g., rich wetland and adjacent steppe) to another, focusing on few, rapidly depleted resources. According to this view, the OCZs define the annual or territorial (i.e., multi-annual, after Kelly,

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