

A Trout in the Milk: Circumstantial Evidence for Disputed Tenancy at Seep Spring, Northern Mojave Desert

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“Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.” Henry David Thoreau

Abstract

What follows is a brief description of the Seep Spring Site, in which we see that the geographic location is essentially where two, and perhaps three, ethnographic borders intersect at hinterlands far-removed from ethnographic “core areas.” A Late Prehistoric date is suggested for the overall site, which is assumed to date the rock art as well. This latter supposition is critical to the overall thesis presented here. The rock art of the site is described, focused on those elements observed in superimposed contexts. I then discuss additional materials recovered in support of the “multi-social” proposition, including exotica from the Puebloan and Hohokam southwest, the Pacific Coast, and the mountains to the north and to the west. I will conclude with the proposition that the Seep Spring Site was a “processors” station (*sensu lato* Bettinger and Baumhoff 1982) that attracted multiple social groups who carried with them differing artistic traditions and distinctive exotic materials derived from their home lands

The Seep Spring Site in the northern Mojave Desert shows circumstantial but compelling evidence for a Late Prehistoric landscape under dispute by two or more ethnographic groups. The most persuasive evidence for this suggestion takes the form of superimposed rock art elements, found at various

places over the large site complex. The rock art elements, one atop the other, were created using very different techniques, and in very different styles. The art thus does not appear to depict an episodic or unified composition. Instead, it appears that multiple artists labored under differing artistic traditions. If so, we may suggest that the art represents diverse peoples asserting territorial priority, presumably a consequence of competition over nearby natural resources.

Several additional lines of evidence appear to support the assertion that multiple social groups are represented in the rock art at Seep Spring. This evidence takes the form of exotic materials that originated from widely divergent locations, including Southwestern painted pottery, items of Pacific coast and other shell, and preserved seeds that may have different geographic origins. Ethnographically, the Seep Spring Site is located near the confluence of at least three territorial boundaries which suggests that these geographical clues correspond to differing ethnographic territories. Although no single line of evidence—rock art superimposition included—necessarily demonstrates social variability at the site,

in combination, these multiple lines of evidence strongly suggest the presence of differing social groups asserting claims and counterclaims.

The reader should know from the outset that I intend to entirely side-step the thorny issue of rock art function. It is not suggested that rock art served as a visible means to convey ownership or social supremacy, or as a symbolic process for vanquishing competitors. Instead, I simply assert that people from different societies created the art in a visible sequence, their original motives notwithstanding. However, because elements are frequently found one atop the other, there is the appearance of a sequence of artists unsympathetic to the artists who came before. From this supposition it is reasonable to assert a competitive aspect among the artists. But in the end, it makes no difference to the thesis presented here whether the artists were shamans on vision quests, lay hunters seeking luck, adolescents performing coming of age rites, or competitors expressing their claims. The point is simply that multiple social groups are strongly suggested by these artistic elements.

Site Description

The Seep Spring site (CA-SBR-51, -52, -53) lies in the foothills at the northwestern end of Superior Valley, approximately 2.5 kilometers northeast of Pilot Knob (Fig. 1). This locale is very loosely defined as a border area for the Desert Kawaiisu (Underwood 2006), the Western or Panamint Shoshone (Thomas, Pendleton, and Cappannri 1986), and within known foray-distance for Southern Paiute groups (Kelly and Fowler 1986: Figure 1, and also Sutton et al. 2007:Figure 15.2.). Local foothills are composed of extruding rhyolitic tuff flows. In certain places the tuff takes the character of narrow hogback ridges which rise out of the surrounding alluvial plain. Seep Spring is located where three contiguous hogback ridges have formed

a U-shaped enclosure of approximately two hectares (five acres), open to the west (Fig. 2). Within and immediately outside the enclosure are several seeps or springs which, in the present day, flow permanently or semi-permanently. The site includes 13 distinctive activity loci, defined by features such as rock art panels, rockshelters, unusually high surface artifact density, bedrock milling stations, or combinations of these (Walsh and Backes 2005). All of the site loci are unified by a very sparse deposit of surface artifacts, including chert, chalcedony, rhyolite, basalt, and obsidian debitage, as well as rare brownware ceramic sherds and ground stone fragments.

The Seep Spring Site has a somewhat checkered history of private collection, controlled archaeological inquiry, and an exasperating combination of the two that spans at least the last seven decades (Walsh and Backes 2005:13–14). It is necessary to detail this history in order to set the context for several of the problems with the data. Peck and Smith (1957) briefly reported on a rather substantial corpus of collected archaeological materials. Unfortunately, all reported artifacts uniformly lack vertical provenience, and horizontal provenience is often ambiguous and always sketchy. For this reason, fine-grained spatial or stratigraphic analyses of the artifacts so gathered are simply not possible at this time, and artifactual materials are necessarily treated here as an undifferentiated lot. Moreover, selected artifacts initially reported by Peck and Smith are conspicuously absent from the existing collection, notably those of an exotic nature such as black-on-white painted pottery, shell ornaments, and other curiosities such as incised slate and painted tablets. Unfortunately, several of these sorts of artifacts are critical to this paper. Also missing are an untold number of projectile points, many described only colloquially as “bird points,” “weapon points,” and the like, which are critical to dating the site. Nevertheless, both Smith and Peck

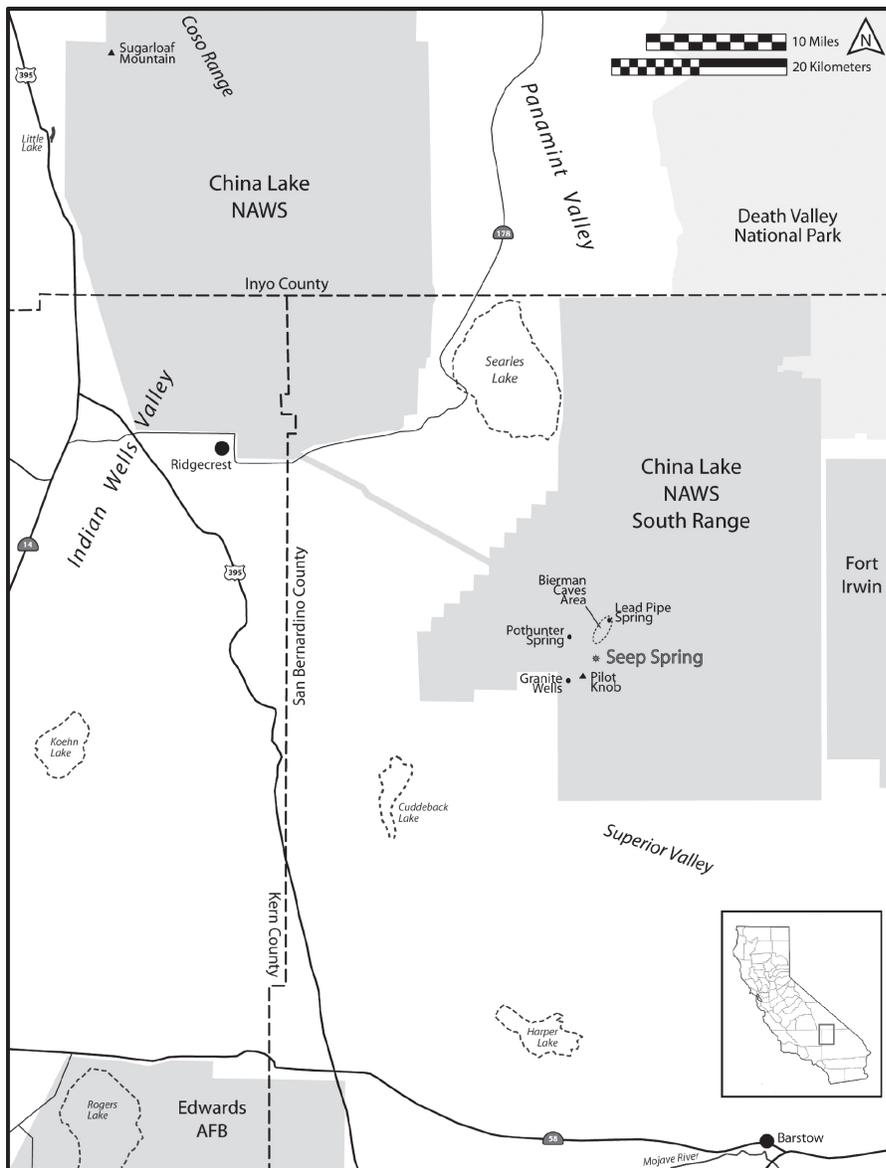


Fig. 1. Regional Location Map.

were seasoned field hands, and we may implicitly trust their ability to distinguish local from exotic pottery wares, among other things. In other words, although several key items are no longer in the artifact assemblage, it may be taken on faith that the descriptions offered by Peck and Smith have utility as “presence-absence” data.

Two more recent efforts have tried to make the best of the previously collected assemblage. The first of these included a careful catalogue of the materials collected largely by Peck and Smith, which included perishables such as basketry and twine, flaked and ground stone, local ceramics, and floral and faunal samples (Gardner 1996). The second effort took the form of an archaeological reconnaissance and in-field inventory of extant features

and curated materials undertaken by Ancient Enterprises, Inc., at the instigation of the Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake, Environmental Area (Walsh and Backes 2005). The analyses presented herein make use of all three data sets, to varying degrees: materials reported but perhaps no longer available for inspection (Peck and Smith 1957); materials ably catalogued, despite the vexing issue of artifact provenience (Gardner 1996); and *in situ* features still extant at the Seep Spring Site (Walsh and Backes 2005). In all, the artifact component from Seep Spring is replete with problems and there is no assertion that the corpus of data for the site is optimally characterized at this time.

Finally, it is worth noting that Peck and Smith, in 1957, decried the loss of surface artifacts to private collectors. This first-hand observation spanned their activities at the site between the late 1940s and the late 1950s. Sadly, private collection has apparently run largely unabated since then as well, because the present surface deposit is considerably diminished from even the “depleted” surface component they described 50 years ago.

Site Dating

Despite irregularities in data context, the vast majority of chronological indicators—from all collections—point to the Late Prehistoric period, or post-AD 1000. Gardner’s (1996) catalogue of the Peck and Smith collection includes primarily Cottonwood and Desert-series points. Peck and Smith (1957) note a surfeit of “bird-points,” a colloquialism most of us understand to refer to late points (Cottonwood and Desert-series). Gardner (1996) reported an *Olivella* spire-ground bead consistent with the Class B1 type of the Late Prehistoric, ca. AD 1100+ (Bennyhoff and Hughes 1987:121). Finally, Walsh and Backes (2005: their Appendix 1) report eight hydration readings from obsidian derived from the Sugarloaf region of the

Coso Volcanic Field. These readings range from 5.0 to 3.8 microns inclusive, suggesting dates ranging from 964–510 BP (AD 1040–1494). One of these obsidian readings is a 4.0 micron band derived from a small side-notched point, dating to 574 BP, AD 1430, (Walsh and Backes 2005:39). Other Late Prehistoric indicators include brownware pottery and bedrock mortars at the site. Although these latter need not derive only from the Late Prehistoric, neither is out of place at a Late Prehistoric site.

Nevertheless, several chronological indicators suggest greater antiquity for the site. These include at least two Elko points (Garner 1996, Walsh and Backes 2005:85) and Gypsum and perhaps even Pinto points suggested by Peck and Smith (1958:29). However, we cannot assume that an attractive locale such as Seep Spring was completely ignored until the very recent past, and we should perhaps expect some chronological depth. Indeed, Walsh and Backes (2005:78) report an obsidian hydration reading of 11.8 microns from a small shelter less than a mile from Seep Spring (CA-SBR-11785); and nearby site CA-SBR-8333 dates intermittently between 1850 BC to AD 1350 (Walsh 2000). We can assume, however, with the overwhelming majority of Late Prehistoric indicators at the Seep Spring Site, that most of the site components date to this time period. I also assume that the rock art dates to the Late Prehistoric period.

The Data: Superimposed Rock Art

Five of the total 13 site loci show rock art and, for our purposes here, four of these five show superimposition of at least two rock art elements. Unfortunately, while the superimposition shows clearly in the field, in virtually all lighting conditions without magnification, it does not show well in standard photographs, particularly in black-and-white. The Walsh and Backes (2005) monograph documents as best possible the superimposition.

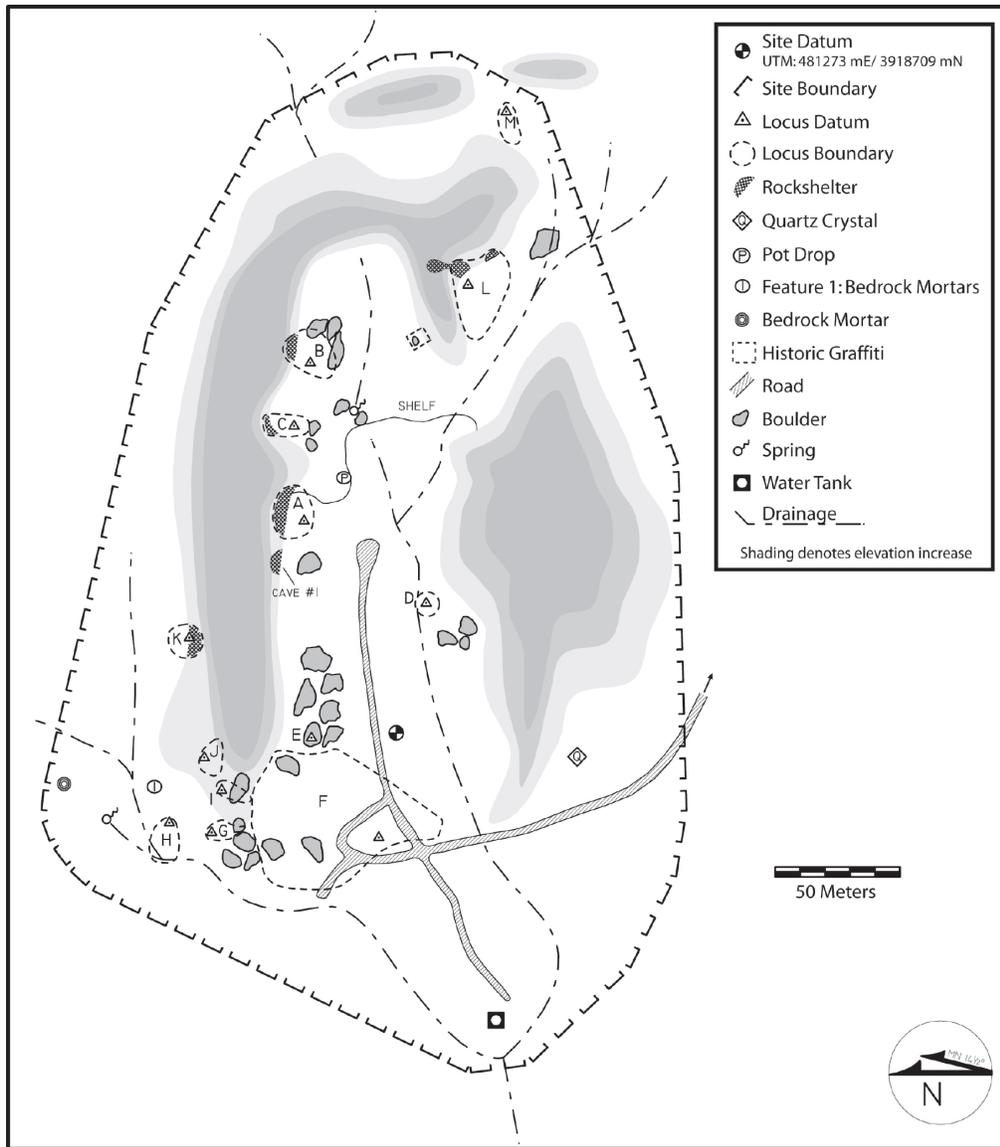


Fig. 2. Site Map, Seep Spring (CA-SBR-51, -52, and -53).

Locus A

Locus A (Fig. 2) is a rockshelter with painted elements on the walls and ceiling, including both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms in either black or red. Several of these elements have been scratched over with fine engraved lines and cross-hatching. Because the rockshelter was clearly the focus of occupation in the historic era, it was first assumed that the scratched elements represent

historic vandalism. Indeed, incised historical graffiti is present at several points over the site, including initials, names and the date “1899.” However, we shall see below that finely scratched lines and cross-hatching underlie art elements that are clearly pre-historic in origin. Although it cannot be stated for certain for Locus A, it is not necessary to assume that simple scratched elements are a consequence of historic vandalism.

Locus G

Locus G (Fig. 2) shows deeply incised, blunt lines and chevrons as well as fine scratches overlain by a wash of red and black pigments. Because the red and black pigments bleed smoothly into one another, it is likely that all of the paint was laid in a single episode. The pigmented surfaces have in turn been gouged away by pecking and engraving in forms suggesting a chain of connected circles, spoked circles, parallel and zigzag lines, amorphous pecking, and a sinuous stick figure that summons the image of either a long-fingered human or a Joshua tree.

Although multimedia rock art is known for the northern Mojave, including paint laid over incised petroglyphs, (Grant 1968:26, Reichert 1998:101), the addition of a third form in superposition—pecking and engraving—is unusual. A fourth rock art element is observed at Locus G, which apparently pre-dates all other forms. A grooved “shield” glyph is overlain by no other forms; however, a portion of the glyph was destroyed by a natural rock spall some time in prehistory. All other rock art types—scratching, engraving, painting and pecking—are found on the spalled surface. These element forms thus clearly post-date the shield. I suggest that no fewer than three, and perhaps as many as four episodes of rock art rendering are represented at Locus G.

Locus I

Locus I (Fig. 2) consists of eight rock art panels, two of which show superimposed elements. One panel (Panel D: Walsh and Backes 2005:53–63) shows a black, stick-figure anthropomorphic which has been partially overlain by fine scratching. Scratched elements extend well beyond the anthropomorphism, and apparently had a larger purpose than simple defacement of the stick figure.

Several pecked elements are visible on the panel, but none in direct superposition with either painting or scratching. I suggest no fewer than two, and as many as three art rendering episodes at Locus I, Panel D.

Locus I, Panel E shows pecked linear and circular forms as well as haphazard, shallow pits. Two pecked elements suggest the so-called “medicine bag” motif, a common Coso rock art style (Grant 1968:18, 36; Walsh and Backes 2005:59). Although the “medicine bags” are unmarred, various other pecked forms on Panel E are overlain by scratched lines, cross-hatching, and scratched radial “star burst” forms. I suggest no fewer than two episodes of rock art rendering at Locus I, Panel E.

It is worth noting that Panels D and E are relatively hidden from view; full appreciation of the rock art requires the observer to assume a crouched position (Panel D) or a supine position (Panel E). Obviously, the artists had to assume these positions as well. It thus cannot be stated that this rock art only served the purpose of blatantly announcing a territorial claim; something far more subtle was at play, that nevertheless compelled a succession of rock art episodes.

Locus J

Locus J shows the barest remnant of what was likely a rectilinear pictograph in red. The element has been all but obliterated by a superimposed pecked rectangle. Pecked elements extend well beyond the painted element, and these are in turn overlain by finely-scratched cross-hatching. I suggest no fewer than three separate episodes.

Summary

Four site loci show rock art superimposition to one degree or another, ranging from two to as many as

four “strata.” It is not possible however to generate a unilinear site-wide seriation of rock art types. Indeed, it appears that, stratigraphically, the various forms—painting, pecking, scratching, incising—provide contradictory sequences from locus to locus. It is, in fact, this stratigraphic discordance that argues strongly against simple and wholesale displacement of one social group by another. Instead, it appears that Seep Spring was subject to a complicated succession of social groups, including periodic return visits by any given people, each of whom altered or re-altered the rock art landscape according to their fashion.

It is of some interest to note that grooved, shield-type glyphs appear to have been the only technique exempted from subsequent defacement or alteration. I have noted for Locus G a grooved “shield” glyph that was truncated by a natural rock spall. While the spall was subject to a sequence of incising, painting and pecking, the intact portion of the shield was left untouched. Similarly, a rather remarkable boulder sits in plain view within the Seep Spring enclosure, showing grooved curvilinear abstractions (Walsh and Backes 2005:32–36). Although the boulder (Locus E:Fig. 2) is time-worn, no superimposed elements are noted. Is it possible that grooved petroglyphs were recognized prehistorically as ancient and thus exempt from counterclaim? Is grooved art functionally distinctive, and thus exempt from counter-claim? Or were these perhaps superimposed after all, but by paint which has not survived into the archaeological present?

Exotica

Another line of evidence for socially-distinctive occupations of the site takes the form of exotic materials in the artifact assemblage. Finding small amounts of exotic goods at sites in the northern

Mojave comes as no great surprise, but the materials at Seep Spring appear to suggest many points of origin, widely separated in space. Unfortunately, nearly all of the truly exotic materials that we wish to discuss currently are missing from the collection. However, Peck and Smith (1957) mentioned them all in their monograph. Because all of these artifacts are practically impossible to misidentify, we may take their description in the monograph on faith.

Peck and Smith noted two black-on-white potsherds, and these are clearly representative of the Puebloan southwest. Because the artifacts are missing, we can’t pursue this matter in typological terms, so we can’t specify a more specific geographic origin or make use of the dates that accompany most southwestern pottery. Still, we have evidence for contacts with the Puebloan east.

Walsh and Backes (2005) report a single rim sherd that suggests the lip of a corrugated jar, a notable form of Puebloan utility ware. The sherd is too small to suggest this with certainty, however, and it could alternatively be a badly-burned recurved rim of local brownware.

Peck and Smith also mention recovery of a single sherd with a painted design executed in red-on-gray. Red-on-gray pottery is distinctly not of an Anasazi tradition, but does suggest one of a variety of types known for the Hohokam, centered around Phoenix, Arizona and parts south (Gladwin et al. 1965:171–201). It must also be noted that protohistoric Kumeyaay potters made a red-on-gray pottery (Van Camp 1979). If we had the sherd in hand, we easily could distinguish Hohokam from Kumeyaay pottery, but based only on the rather vague “red-on-gray” description, we may do little more than eliminate a local origin for the sherd. This of course rests on the secure belief that Peck and Smith were both well-versed in the local brownware and all its color nuances, and knew an exotic sherd when they

saw one. Whether Hohokam or Kumeayaay, suffice it to say that the sherd is almost certain to be exotic to the northern Mojave, and is very likely derived from a point either to the southeast or to the south.

The original recordation of the site by A. Mohr and A. Bierman in 1948 makes note of a *Glycymeris* shell—not an artifact, just the shell. Unfortunately, this object is missing from the present assemblage. However, *Glycymeris* shell has a distinctive brown zigzag pattern that is practically impossible to misidentify. The Hohokam exported *Glycymeris* shell ornaments well into the Late Prehistoric (McGuire and Howard 1987), which makes the red-on-gray pottery all the more intriguing. However, without the shell in hand it is impossible to distinguish whether the shell is native to the Sea of Cortez, where the Hohokam derived most of their shell, or the Pacific Ocean.

Peck and Smith noted *Olivella* and abalone shell, both worked and unworked, and some of these materials are in the extant collection. *Olivella* may derive from a variety of source locations, including the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez. Abalone is found only on the Pacific coast. In all, the marine shell unambiguously suggests a western origin. The *Glycymeris* may suggest a southwestern source area.

The final form of exotica is presented mainly as a potential direction for further research. CSU Bakersfield catalogued small quantities of pinyon nut and acorn husks (Gardner 1996). Neither of these resources are located anywhere near Seep Spring. Unfortunately, we do not have stratigraphic details about their recovery, so we cannot know whether these were horizontally or vertically separated, or all from one cache. Still, we can make a few observations about the resources in general. The nearest present-day localities for both pinyon and acorn are the Panamint Mountains about 75 ki-

lometers to the north, and the Tehachapi Mountains about 100 kilometers to the west. Going very much out on a limb here, I note that pinyon is far more prevalent in the Panamints located to the north and east; and that acorns are far more prevalent in the Tehachapis to the west. Perhaps these represent distinctive northern and western origins.

Discussion

I emphasize that the suggestion of multiple social groups in dispute over claims to Seep Spring hinge on several critical assumptions that have not been fully demonstrated. Paramount among these is the time frame presented for the corpus of Seep Spring data—namely that the artifacts and features, including most of the rock art, are more or less coeval, and that they date to the Late Prehistoric. Only in that case does the thesis seem plausible. I hasten to point out, though, that these assumptions are abundantly testable through additional archaeological inquiry at the Seep Spring Site.

Seep Spring in the Late Prehistoric may in some sense represent a “perfect storm” of potential competition-engendering factors. The Seep Spring Site was occupied, at least in part, during the final stages of the Medieval Climatic Anomaly, a period of widespread environmental deterioration caused by warming and stochastic droughts (Gardner 2006). In addition, the Late Prehistoric coincides with the consensus time frame for the so-called Numic spread (Madsen and Rhode 1994), a time of population dispersal and displacement that almost certainly required negotiation of new and different social boundaries and disruption to traditional annual rounds. Resource shortfalls and demographic disruption clearly placed competitive stresses on the local population of the northern Mojave Desert. Economic and social solutions to these stresses included increased notions of priority over particularly productive resources (Bettinger 1999), private

ownership of goods and materials (Eerkins 2004), and territorial buffer zones between competing social groups (Allen 1998:74).

The presence of superimposed rock art at Seep Spring is the “trout in the milk” in support of the multi-social proposition presented here. Absent the rock art, and several alternative explanations could be offered to account for the simple presence of far-flung exotica. For example, a village site serving highly mobile family groups may present a gathering of exotica. However, there are no additional indicators of a populous village site at Seep Spring; there are no discrete middens, no houses, no cemetery or substantial ceremonial space and, notwithstanding two bedrock mortar stations, no discrete work areas (Hector 1990, Walsh and Backes 2005:92) A second alternative explanation for relative abundance of far-flung exotica might be a fandango, or other seasonal gathering site (Wells and Backes, this issue). However, these festivals are generally located very near or adjacent to large villages, at least in the ethnographic present (Steward 1938:74–75, 184). We simply have no evidence that Seep Spring was subject to large-scale population aggregation. Finally, Seep Spring may have been a small-scale trading center, an outpost, more or less, centrally located to facilitate inter-social commerce. But in all cases, we return to superimposed rock art, and must wonder why this phenomenon would occur at an amicable meeting place.

I cannot suggest a scale at which these socially-distinctive occupations occurred. Are we seeing different ethnographic or linguistic groups? Groups from different villages? Or different bands or even families? I cannot answer these questions. However, the presence of widely variant rock art styles and techniques, superimposed over one another, suggests the scale is somewhere at the supra-village level.

Hinterlands in the northern Mojave Desert were sparsely and sporadically occupied for good reason; primary resource patches were few, and far between, difficult to reach, and in the end, unpredictable in their yields. As such, these hinterland resource localities were downright risky as seasonal destinations. The risks soared with the additional complication that on arrival the patch may be found to be occupied or lately exploited and, worse still, by strangers. If a “first-come-first-served” policy held sway, as in the processor’s strategy, a reliable place like Seep Spring was probably worth fighting for.

Conclusion

I have built something of a house of cards, resting on a foundation of superimposed rock art. Superimposition of elements does not appear to be explicable by reference to an intentional sequence on the part of a single artist, or even multiple artists laboring under a unified artistic tradition. When viewed as evidence for inter-social competition for the Seep Spring locality, additional data in the form of exotic materials support this assertion.

Bettinger and Baumhoff (1982) convincingly have argued their “traveler and processor” model (also Bettinger 1999). Increased population and competition for resources placed a high premium on productive and predictable locales. Full and efficient exploitation of these resource patches was necessary to provision winter stores. Thus, these locales were well worthy of claim and defense. In the absence of formal territorial borders, the model essentially proposes a “first-come-first-served” strategy, and Seep Spring is sufficiently remote from known ethnographic core-areas to render effective first-hand defense of territory impractical. In the hinterlands, where in-person defense of claims

was impossible, symbolic claims of priority may have been asserted. In all, it is highly likely that when Seep Spring flowed in the Late Prehistoric, animosity did, too.

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