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# The Ethnohistory of Turquoise Mining in Southeastern California

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**E**THNOGRAPHIC data on the mining and use of turquoise in southeastern California provide an analogous framework for the archaeological interpretation of prehistoric patterns in the Halloran Springs Region of San Bernardino County. The ethnographic record also provides some insight into Mohave and Chemehuevi land tenure and exploitation patterns.

Ethnographic literature indicates both knowledge of the location of and in some cases actual mining of turquoise deposits in the Halloran Springs Region of San Bernardino County by Chemehuevi and possibly Mohave groups. In at least two cases, oral tradition suggests precontact mining in the region by non-indigenous groups.

The earliest reference to the exploitation of turquoise among Southern Paiute peoples in the Mohave Desert is the account of Eisen (1898). Eisen collected an interesting oral tradition regarding turquoise extraction in the Halloran Springs area. This account was apparently given by "Indian Johnny," son of chief Tecopah, who had heard it from his father.

As this man [ancestral folk hero] told the story he spoke as a victor, for he it was who helped to drive out the strange pale Indians

who put a wondrous value on the bright blue stone they dug from the hills.

These pale Indians so the story runs came into the desert from the south. They took up their abodes in caves and had many strange signs on the cliffs [petroglyphs] that they claimed had a supernatural influence.

The Piute [sic] braves saw all this and liked it not. "Those people are witches," some said, "and we should drive them out." But none dared make the attack, for the pale Indians were powerful men and had great hammers of stone with which they could strike death dealing blows and so pale Indians were allowed to live in peace for many moons. They multiplied in numbers and became prosperous. The Piutes [sic] liked them less and less as the years wore on and at last decided to drive them out.

Just how this was done history does not tell in detail. But there was a great war and the Piutes [sic] lost many of their best men. So many that at one time they despaired of the task. In the end, however, they won. The pale Indians were nearly all killed, and those who were not ran away, never to come back. Behind them they left all of their tools and utensils, to be covered up by the sand of the desert. And there some of them are lying yet, for no Piute [sic] ever went near the place. They said it was haunted ground [Eisen 1898].

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While the pedigree of the story Eisen collected is unclear, references to Desert Mohave (Patayan?) and the routing of them by Southern Paiutes is well documented in both the oral traditions of the Southern Paiute (Kroeber 1959:296-297; Laird 1976:141-142) and the Mohave (Kroeber 1959:297-298). However, with regard to "outsiders" mining turquoise in the Mohave Desert, Isabel Kelly (personal communication) recalled no similar stories from her Southern Paiute field work. Interestingly, however, Laird noted that ". . . the root of at least one Chemehuevi color name, 'sawa-', blue or green, is virtually identical with the Tewa word for this color" (Numic and Tanoan, respectively) (Laird 1976:101). The same root is used most prominently in the Chemehuevi word for turquoise (Laird 1976:88-89). If not coincidence, this linguistic similarity may, at least, reflect the direction of earlier turquoise markets (i.e., Hopi-Tewa).

During the preparation of the ethnology element for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management California Desert Plan, Laidlaw (1979), utilized a Chemehuevi informant (D.L.) living at the Colorado River. D.L. is approximately 70-years-old, and the third generation male in his family to mine turquoise at Halloran Springs. The author provided a series of questions regarding turquoise mining to be presented to the informant. The informant was questioned about the sources of his information.

My father and my grandfather were there [Halloran Springs]. My grandfather knew [about] it for a very long time. He probably knew it from his father too [Laidlaw 1979].

When asked about the nature of trips to the mines, D.L. responded that ". . . many men went; usually four or five but no women. [The men were] no special age—just strong men" (Laidlaw 1979, brackets added). Regarding the route to the mines from the Colorado River, D.L. remarked ". . . it depends sometimes. I

think maybe the Deer Song Trail would be the best way" (Laidlaw 1979). While Laird (1976: 269) indicated the Deer Song Trail began at Bouse Wash and headed *east* of the Colorado River, D.L. was referring to another trail which heads west of the river into the Mohave Sink region (Laidlaw, personal communication). It should be noted that George Laird, a Southern Chemehuevi, probably would have been unfamiliar with Northern Chemehuevi trail systems. Deer Song Trails are apparently generic or clan specific, resulting in variations in trail themes (Laidlaw, personal communication). The territorial boundaries of the two groups as they related to Halloran Springs remain unknown.

When asked about other sources of turquoise, D.L. responded: "Yes, well we get some from Hopi-land; they come over here sometimes and bring it. Kingston [Mountains] is good too" (Laidlaw 1979, brackets added). When asked if his people actually went to visit the Hopi, D.L. said, "Sometimes I think, but different people live there—sometimes we collect there" (Laidlaw 1979). Besides Halloran Springs, Kingston Mountains, and the Hopi region, D.L. also indicated on a map traditional turquoise mining areas in the Old Dad Mountains, California and near Kingman, Arizona. While turquoise deposits are geologically known to exist near Halloran Springs, in the Providence-New York Mountains, and in the Cerbat Range near Kingman, Arizona, neither the Kingston Mountains nor the Old Dad Mountains have previously been recorded as turquoise sites (cf. Murdoch and Webb 1966:376). The Chemehuevi also recognized the Providence-New York Mountains by the placename "Green Stone Mountains" (Laird 1976:121). Laird (1976:89) also noted the traditional knowledge of a mine north of the New York Mountains (Crescent Peak, Nevada?).

Regarding the extraction of turquoise, D.L. related (both from experience and his knowledge of oral narratives) that "people

would mostly just pick it [turquoise] up in those places but sometimes they might have dug it . . ." (Laidlaw 1979). The fact that later cultures may have simply collected turquoise from the quarries of earlier mines is also reflected in archaeological observations (see Leonard and Drover this issue).

When asked if he traded the turquoise he mined, D.L. responded, "That is what it was good for a lot. We did not do a lot of this though; mainly we got it for ourselves and the Mohave sometimes" (Laidlaw 1979). Kelly (n.d.a:54, 56; n.d.b:92) reported the trading of turquoise from Desert Chemehuevi to Southern Chemehuevi, Cahuilla, and Mohave.

A significant insight regarding Chemehuevi turquoise mining is provided by D.L.'s answer to the question of whether anyone was permitted to go to the turquoise mines or collection areas. D.L. responded: "No . . . no this is why some [people] could not go to the Kingman; because they were not of a certain group. You could only go the places where your songs told you" (Laidlaw 1979). Such a statement seems to imply song or clan control of the Kingman turquoise resource. If D.L.'s statement is accurate, then Heizer and Treganza erred when they wrote,

Mine and quarry sites in Native California were national resources which were available to any or all tribal members who shared in possession of such sites [Heizer and Treganza 1971:355].

Laird (1976:24) and Kelly (n.d.a:20) also suggested that the use of turquoise among the Chemehuevi as adornment was associated with social ranking.

While the Mohave are known to have possessed and presumably traded turquoise, there is little ethnographic evidence to suggest they actually mined the mineral. An interesting account of Mohave knowledge of turquoise appears in oral tradition collected by Malcolm Rogers. The informant first states that at one time this group lived in the Mohave Desert.

Our people the Mohave moved west out into the center of the Mohave Desert which at first had many fine streams and lakes around which to live [Rogers 1978:61-62].

The text then goes on to specify the presence of turquoise mines.

I overheard my father telling yours that he intended to make a hunting trip out into the desert to the old homeland of the Mohave . . . They also plan to visit the region of the old blue stone mines, where the 'ancient ones' of Arizona got their gems for jewelry [Rogers 1978:62].

In addition to indicating an ancestral, desert homeland and apparent knowledge of the Halloran Springs turquoise mines, the oral tradition also suggests knowledge of prehistoric Southwestern contact.

Sparse archaeological evidence of ethnohistoric activity in a cave near the Himalayan Turquoise Mines was noted by Rogers (n.d.: M-20, M-21) who observed grass beds which he believed were of Chemehuevi or Mohave origin. In this context, Rogers (1929:6) mentioned the absence of "Mohave pottery" (Lower Colorado Buff Wares?) and the presence of "Panamint Brown" pottery (Owens Valley Brown Ware or Southern Paiute Utility Ware?) (Rogers n.d.: M-20). It is apparent from his field notes that Rogers (n.d.: M-20) believed that these recent archaeological materials represented mainly Chemehuevi activities.

Thus, oral traditions suggest traditional knowledge of and occasional use of the Halloran Springs turquoise deposits by the Chemehuevi Southern Paiute, Mohave, and unknown Southwestern groups. None of the ethnographic accounts of indigenous, contact period exploitations would seem to account for the extent of mining evidence and artifactual assemblages present at Halloran Springs.

The ethnohistoric accounts reflect intermittent visits by special activity groups who appear to have likely collected turquoise from the tailings of prehistoric mines. The mineral was

apparently used conservatively by Chemehuevi and occasionally traded to the Mohave and other groups.

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