

UC Merced

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Richard E. Hughes (editor): Perspectives on Trade and Exchange in California and the Great Basin

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4j1180bm>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 35(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

Stevens, Nathan

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Perspectives on Trade and Exchange in California and the Great Basin

Richard E. Hughes (editor)
Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011.
336 pp., \$50.00 (cloth)

Reviewed by Nathan Stevens

Far Western Anthropological Research Group, Inc.,
Davis, California

Trying to understand the complexity of prehistoric interactions by examining the material culture left behind is like trying to figure out who won the World Series by counting the hot dog wrappers left in the stadium. That said, California and the Great Basin are blessed with some good indicators of trade and exchange. Obsidian, shell beads, pottery, and even plant foods and basketry provide information about distributions of exotic materials in space and time, and this book deals with each of these data types in interesting and, at times, innovative ways.

The book begins with an excellent framing discussion by editor Richard Hughes. He argues that we should keep the distributions of materials distinct from our interpretations of how they got there. While this is easier said than done, the main idea is that we should partition research on materials conveyance into where materials are found, and separately, how they got there, with explicit linking arguments tying the two together. Previous research, he argues, often posited either trade or direct exchange to explain material distributions, but often did not address the broader implications of one or the other explanation. Things may not be as simple, or as complex, as we imagine and we should therefore be explicit about our arguments for a particular type of trade relationship. These are good points, and it is good for our thoughts to go where Hughes has directed us. What I was left wondering, however, is whether the data can also go there.

Overall, the contributions are thorough and there was a concerted effort to address the topics that Hughes spells out. However, the chapters would have benefited

from having abstracts, both as an aid to the reader and to help focus the topic of each paper—which I suspect would have been difficult for some. Some are problem-oriented and deal with one type of material, while others review multiple data sources on exchange and interaction in a region. Many chapters, including those by Janetski et al., Beck and Jones, Mack, King et al., Gilreath and Hildebrandt, and Kelly either consider obsidian directly or use obsidian data as supporting evidence of materials conveyance or interaction. This is not surprising as obsidian has numbers, dates (of a sort), and provenance on its side, something other data types in this region cannot always boast. Nevertheless, chapters dealing primarily with other materials, including Rosenthal's on shell beads, Mack and Eerkens' on ceramics, Fowler and Hattori's on textiles, and Rhode's on plant foods are reminders of the diversity of items moving across the prehistoric landscape. Rosenthal's contribution on shell bead use in central California, in particular, brings together data on subsistence, mobility, and demography through time, providing a vivid context for the movement of this commodity throughout a sequence of increasingly populous and regionally-differentiated hunter-gatherers.

One question that kept creeping into my mind while reading the book was “what, exactly, is an ‘interaction sphere’ and why do we need it?” I think this is at best a vague concept that brings little clarity to the topic. How is this term different from the “cultures” of the culture historians and what does it tell us about prehistoric populations except that they were more similar towards the center and more different at the edges? What is actually doing the work of holding this entity together? Attempting answers to these sorts of questions may stimulate useful research, but I remain skeptical that the interaction sphere concept is necessary or useful.

Another observation concerns that previously-mentioned wealth of obsidian data that California and Great Basin archaeologists have. Many other areas of the world lack any sort of ability to source and date informal lithic artifacts, but it is not clear to me that western North American archaeologists enjoy any reputation for understanding flaked-stone use any better than

anyone else. Either these data are being underutilized or the problems are more complex than we imagine. I suspect that as well-designed centralized databases and information-sharing become more commonplace, it will be increasingly possible not only to see things regionally from the godlike perspective afforded by GIS, but also to drill down to answer site and subsite-level problems. Also related to obsidian, it is discouraging that it has been almost 40 years since Singer and Ericson's work at Bodie Hills and almost 20 years since Gilreath and Hildebrandt's work at the Coso obsidian source and we seem no closer to understanding the mechanisms behind the "peak and crash" pattern of obsidian quarry use. There are certainly some good explanations, and the

two papers on the subject in this volume (by King et al. and Gilreath and Hildebrandt) go a long way towards resolving the issue, but I don't think we can say the book is closed on this one yet (take notice, graduate students).

There is no need to go into any more detail about each chapter as this has already been done in the two excellent review chapters at the end of the book by Michael Moratto and David Hurst Thomas. What can I say about the book that these two eminent scholars have not already said? If you are working in either of these two regions or farther afield and have a project or research topic dealing with trade and exchange, you will definitely want to cite it, likely want to read it, and probably ought to own it.



California's Channel Islands: The Archaeology of Human- Environmental Interactions

Christopher S. Jazwa and Jennifer E. Perry (eds.)
Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013.
204 pages, 24 illustrations, 19 maps, 20 tables,
\$40 (Paperback), \$65 (Cloth), \$52 (eBook).

Reviewed by Adrian R. Whitaker

Far Western Anthropological Research Group,
Davis, CA 95616

Although they comprise a tiny fraction of the area and the archaeological record of the state of California, the Channel Islands have played a disproportionately large role in the development of California archaeology over the past 25 years. A recent volume edited by Jazwa and Perry and published by University of Utah Press demonstrates why these small and isolated islands hold such allure. The sub-title of the volume—*The Archaeology of Human-Environment Interactions*—is somewhat of a misnomer, because the contributions go beyond simple environmental considerations to delve into many of the key questions addressed by hunter-gatherer scholars worldwide. The chapters are tied together geographically, but are topically diverse, demonstrating that in many

ways the islands are a microcosm of the archaeology of the Western United States.

The volume begins with an introduction and synthetic overview of Channel Island prehistory and geography by the editors. Nine contributions follow, arranged more or less in chronological/archaeological order from Early to Late Holocene. Braje, Erlandson, and Rick examine the distribution and nature of Paleocoastal sites and artifacts on the northern Channel Islands. Gusick and Glassow offer chapters discussing settlement patterns on Santa Cruz Island during the Early (Gusick) and Middle Holocene (Glassow). Jazwa, Kennett, and Winterhalder expand on previous Ideal Free Distribution studies with an application of the model to a single drainage on Santa Rosa Island. The remainder of the contributions focus on Late Holocene phenomena. Guttenberg and colleagues provide a novel application of GIS to an examination of spatial patterning at a single site on San Nicolas Island. Gill synthesizes previous studies as well as her dissertation research on paleoethnobotanical remains from all eight islands. Perry also synthesizes data from the entire chain in a study of ritual items, particularly those related to the Late Holocene *'Antap* and *Chingichgnish* cults. The final two chapters report the results of recent work on Santa Catalina, perhaps