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The Archaeology of Nahas Cave: Material Culture and Chronology. Mark G. Plew.

Boise State University Archaeological Reports 13, Boise Idaho, 1986, vi + 109 pp., \$7.50 (paper).

Reviewed by:

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Nahas Cave was excavated by Mark Plew of Boise State University. Plew's report on the material culture and chronology of Nahas Cave, a small lava bubble in southwestern Idaho, is reminiscent of an earlier, simpler time as recent as the 1950s when archeology was a straightforward descriptive exercise, rich in artifacts and cultural phases, unfettered by the cumbersome and, to some, confusing questions confronted by most contemporary archeological scholars.

The objectives of the excavation are clearly stated, if not belabored, in two carefully constructed sentences (p. 1) in this slightly-modified excerpt of a dissertation appendix. The first task was to build a local chronology in order to "test the validity of the Southcentral Owyhee upland phase sequence" developed elsewhere by the author. In addition, the excavations were designed to "access [sic] the functional use of caves and rockshelters within the area" (p. 1).

Guided by this rigorous research design, Plew and company invested seven weeks over two field seasons (1979 and 1980) carefully attempting to recognize natural stratigraphy while excavating in 10 cm. arbitrary levels (p. 26). Four natural strata (Zones I - IV) were identified and described, although radiocarbon dates (p. 30), artifacts, and features (pp. 37-98) are provenienced only by arbitrary level. Plew does not provide a chart, nor sufficient information in the text to accurately correlate the arbitrary excavation levels with natural strata, and the

provenience information accompanying the radiocarbon dates is a nightmare. For example, Table 1 (p. 30) lists a radiocarbon date of 260 ± 50 B.P. (Tx-3636) from the 0-10-cm. level. In the feature descriptions, Feature 2 (pp. 37-38), from the 10-20-cm. level is listed as dating 260 ± 75 B.P., but no lab number is given, and no date of 260 ± 75 B.P. is listed in Table 1. Is this the same date as Tx-3636, or is it another? But wait, on pages 39-40, under the description of Feature 7, at 60-70-cm. depth, the date 260 ± 50 B. P. (Tx-3636) is given. What? Is it 0-10 cm., 10-20 cm., or 60-70 cm.? Is it 260 ± 50 B.P. or 260 ± 75 B.P.? I wouldn't place much faith in a "phase sequence" developed or tested with data from this excavation.

Nahas Cave yielded 251 artifacts which are described in some detail. The illustrations by Meg Pfoertner and James Woods are excellent, perhaps the outstanding feature of this report. Plew noted that lithic debitage (5,973 pieces) and faunal remains (8,230 pieces) were recovered from the cave (pp. 95-97), but they were apparently not analyzed, and are not reported. Soil and flotation samples were "regularly" collected (p. 26), but plant macrofossil and pollen analyses are not mentioned.

In fairness to Mark G. Plew and B.S.U., the report title does indicate that only material culture and chronology are to be covered. Perhaps in keeping with the current propensity to publish separate monographs covering various aspects of important research projects (e.g., the Monitor Valley series) we can look forward to a sequel to B.S.U. Report 13 which will illuminate aspects of this research not reported here. Additional studies of some of the materials have been performed (e.g., Plew's 1980 report on the fish bone from Nahas Cave). Perhaps these will be published in detail at some later time.

In sum, the contribution of this report to

archeology must be considered to be minimal. The very limited goals of developing a local chronology and assessing the functional use of the cave (whatever that is) have not been met. A chronology based on materials recovered from arbitrary excavation units dates arbitrary excavation units and nothing else. The importance of stratigraphic excavation, especially in caves, is paramount. Sondage-style excavation in a cave, or in any site with complex stratigraphy is, unless information which could be obtained by no other excavation strategy is specifically sought, a tactical mistake. Stratigraphic control in excavation is best maintained by working into the deposits from an exposed profile. The excavator can see the strata in both vertical and horizontal planes and thus has more than twice as much information on the deposits as one coming down sondage-style from above. Beginning with an exposed face, the excavator has information on the texture, color, composition, thickness, and dip and strike of each stratum prior to excavating the succeeding unit. Quite simply, an excavator will be much more successful at following a stratum than the same excavator will be at finding a stratigraphic change by coming down onto it.

Plew indicates that the 2 x 2-m. excavation units were selected on the basis of the position of roof fall and potholes, and also to provide E-W and N-S profiles, which he contends was facilitated by the use of 20-cm. baulks separating the excavation units. Leaving baulks does not facilitate or provide profiles, unless the excavator for some reason wants to dig for an entire season before attempting to identify strata and draw profiles. Leaving baulks simply breaks up the excavation into isolated units and forces the excavator to rediscover the stratigraphy anew in each square. Much preferable would be to study, draw, and photograph each profile as it is exposed, and then to use that

profile as an entry into the next excavation unit. In this way profile drawings are actually more complete, as drawings of short sections can be later matched together, or even drawn as continuous profiles, whereas profiles broken by baulks will always sacrifice information on the material contained in the baulks.

Stratigraphic excavation is indeed difficult, and Plew clearly had problems excavating the cave and identifying the strata. Lighting problems, "excessive" moisture, and indistinct profiles proved difficult, so Plew excavated in arbitrary levels. If the goals were to develop a local chronology and to make a contribution to local and regional culture history, these goals should have been altered in light of the problems encountered in the cave, and more general questions posed. There are many that come to mind. Which animals were available, and which of these were exploited by the inhabitants of the cave? Which animals were obtained in the near vicinity of the cave and which came from farther away? Which plants were available and which were used? How large were the groups that used the cave? Were cave occupations short-term, or longer-term? Was secondary disposal of refuse practiced, or were the artifacts in primary context? What was the seasonality of occupation? Are the patterns of resource use consistent with expectations from theory, or not? Were tools manufactured and used at Nahas Cave, or were they simply repaired there (Plew [p. 6] hints that he knows the answer to this question, but does not support it with data).

The "functional" use of the cave was similarly not assessed. While plant macrofossils and pollen, lithic debitage and faunal remains may not be "artifacts" to Plew, they are, to most modern archeologists, more important than the "worked" stone and bone. This report would not pass even the

rather limited standards imposed on CRM contractors and cannot be considered a contribution to archeological science. My comparison of this report to the archeology of the 1950s may have been unjust. Archeologists in the 1950s were asking a much more limited array of questions than most archeologists are today, and work conducted 30 years ago cannot be faulted because it does not measure up to the standards of today. My apologies. Work conducted in 1979 and 1980 and published in 1986 should, however, be subject to scrutiny by the standards of today, and in this respect, the Nahas Cave report fails miserably.



The Maxon Ranch Site. Lynn L. Harrell and Scott T. McKern. Rock Springs: Archaeological Services, Western Wyoming College, Cultural Resource Management Report No. 18, 1986, 215 pp., 47 figures, 24 tables, bibliography, 5 appendices, \$10.00.

The Sweetwater Creek Site. Janice C. Newberry and Cheryl Harrison. Rock Springs: Archaeological Services, Western Wyoming College, Cultural Resource Management Report No. 19, 1986, 121 pp., 31 figures, 17 tables, bibliography, 2 appendices, \$7.50.

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The Maxon Ranch Site and the Sweetwater Creek Site are located in southwest Wyoming. These sites are important to archaeology in western North America because they are representative of other sites in southwest Wyoming where Archaic pit-house structures have recently been located. Since 1981, when a structure dating 5,200

B.P. was excavated at the Medicine House Site in the Hanna Basin in southcentral Wyoming (McGuire et al. 1984), archaeologists in Wyoming have located many Early and Middle Plains Archaic residential structures. Both the Maxon and the Sweetwater Creek sites were extensively excavated by Archaeological Services, Western Wyoming College, in 1985 in conjunction with a large phosphate project built by Chevron, U.S.A. Woodward-Clyde Consultants was the primary contractor for the Maxon Ranch excavations.

The Sweetwater Creek Site (48 SW 5175) is located just south of Rock Springs in the Rock Springs Uplift at an elevation of 6,600 feet a.s.l. The site is located near Sweetwater Creek, a tributary of Bitter Creek which runs west into the Green River. The Maxon Ranch Site (48 SW 2590) is about fifty miles south of Rock Springs near the Utah and Wyoming border. It is located in the foothills on the southwest flank of Miller Mountain at an elevation of 7,300-7,500 feet. The site is in the Green River Basin and is located just east of the Flaming Gorge Reservoir.

The Maxon Ranch Site contains four components dating between 5,400 and 1,200 years B.P. These components represent Early, Middle, and Late Plains Archaic periods and the Late Prehistoric Period. All components are interpreted as the result of late winter or spring residential camps. The two earliest components have structural remains in the form of small pithouses. All components have various pit features which served as hearths or roasting pits, or in some cases storage pits. Associated with the features are activity areas that are interpreted primarily as food processing areas. In all components deer, pronghorn, and rabbit were the most common identified game animals. The majority of the bone from the site was smashed beyond possible identification sug-