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Some Aspects of Kitanemuk Prehistory

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The Kitanemuk are one of the lesser known native groups in California. The Kitanemuk spoke a Serran language of the Takic family (Bright 1975) and inhabited and/or claimed portions of the Tehachapi Mountains and the southwesternmost portion of the Mojave Desert (Antelope Valley) during the proto-historic period.

Relatively little ethnographic and archaeological data on the Kitanemuk are available for study. The ethnographic data (cf. Harrington’s Kitanemuk notes) were gathered fairly late, represent a shallow time depth, and pertain mainly to the Tehachapi Mountains. The archaeological data are limited, primarily from Antelope Valley, and mostly unpublished. The late prehistoric period archaeological remains (after 2200 B.P.) from the Antelope Valley have generally been attributed to Shoshonean (Kitanemuk) populations (Robinson 1977). This is in basic agreement with Wallace (1962:178) that most, if not all, of the late prehistoric period remains in the desert are attributable to the recent Shoshonean speakers, and that “the late pattern of life persisted into the historic period without appreciable change.”

It has been suggested that the Antelope Valley was virtually abandoned approximately 300 years ago (Sutton 1979a), and that substantial changes in territory, settlement pattern, economy, and social organization of the valley inhabitants took place at that time. The post 300 B.P. population of the valley represent the ethnographically documented Kitanemuk. It would appear, however, that the pre-300 B.P. populations, were quite different culturally. The extant archaeological data seem to be substantial enough to distinguish this cultural change and to suggest economic, socio-political, and territorial changes during the late prehistoric period. Comparisons between the ethnographic Kitanemuk and the archaeological record from the Antelope Valley support this hypothesis and are discussed below.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

The primary ethnographic data on the Kitanemuk were obtained by J. P. Harrington in 1917. At this time Harrington was only able to interview a few survivors. Harrington’s Kitanemuk notes have never been fully synthesized or published, but have been used by various researchers as a data source (cf. Blackburn and Bean 1978). Kroeber’s (1925) chapter on the Kitanemuk is brief but helpful. A small quantity of other ethnographic data on the Kitanemuk are available (cf. Kroeber 1907; Harrington 1942; Strong 1929).

One of the main thrusts of this paper is a discussion of changes in Kitanemuk territory over time. It is important, therefore, to gain an [214]
understanding of what territory the ethnographic Kitanemuk claimed. Kroeber (1925: 611) stated that the Kitanemuk lived “... on the upper Tejon and Paso creeks ... held the streams on the rear side of the Tehachapis ... the small creeks draining the northern slope of the Liebre and Sawmill range, with the Antelope Valley and the westernmost end of the Mojave Desert ...”. He also reported that the extent of the Kitanemuk territorial claims in the desert were uncertain and that “the population perhaps resided more largely in the smaller San Joaquin portion of the Kitanemuk area” (Kroeber 1925:611-612). The village and place names listed by Kroeber (1925) are in the foothills of the San Joaquin Valley.

Blackburn and Bean (1978) delineate Kitanemuk territory in general agreement with Kroeber (1925). According to Blackburn and Bean (1978:564) “The Kitanemuk were a small group located primarily in the Tehachapi Mountains at the southern edge of the San Joaquin Valley ... The Kitanemuk were thus primarily mountain dwellers, although during cooler seasons of the year, they did range into the arid lowlands to the south.” The ‘arid lowlands’ to the south would be the Antelope Valley. As in Kroeber (1925), the known villages shown by Blackburn and Bean (1978: fig. 1) are all located in the Tehachapis.

The major point of variance between Kroeber (1925) and Blackburn and Bean (1978) seems to be the extent of Kitanemuk claims in the Antelope Valley. Kroeber (1925) assigns almost the entire Antelope Valley to the Kitanemuk. Blackburn and Bean (1978) assign the Kitanemuk only the northern part of the valley, although it is clear from their territorial map that this boundary is uncertain. A comparison between these territorial assignments is shown in Fig. 1.

There is a consensus that the Kitanemuk claimed portions of the Tehachapi Mountains and the Mojave Desert. Kroeber (1925) and Blackburn and Bean (1978) agree that the mountains were the primary occupation area and that the desert was utilized on a seasonal basis only. This agreement rests, perhaps, upon the traditional assumption that desert areas have little to offer and are incapable of supporting large populations (cf. Wallace 1962, Steward 1938).

The settlement pattern of the precontact Kitanemuk is very poorly understood. As noted above, the ethnographic villages identified by Kroeber (1925) and Blackburn and Bean (1978) are located in the Tehachapis. Neither author identified any villages in the Antelope Valley. The Kitanemuk may have been living at La Liebre and Tejon Ranch during the historic period (Johnson 1978), although the Tataviam may have been at La Liebre (King, Smith, and King 1974). It is unclear if these were precontact settlement areas.

Kitanemuk subsistence patterns are also poorly known. Blackburn and Bean (1978:564) stated that the “general ecological adaptation and subsistence technology of the Kitanemuk differed little from that of their neighbors to the north (Yokuts) or west (Chumash) ...” This would seem to indicate (following the Yokuts example; Wallace 1978) that the Kitanemuk economy emphasized fishing, hunting of waterfowl, and the collection of various roots and seeds. Little emphasis would have been placed on mammals, but rabbits would have been hunted communally.

In a general survey of California Indians, Beals and Hester (1971) classify the Kitanemuk in the “foothill” ecological type and describe their general subsistence strategy as gathering with a minor emphasis on hunting. The settlement pattern is described as relatively permanent villages with occupation and resource utilization at different locals on a seasonal basis. Beals and Hester (1971:82) go on to state that “the Kitanemuk did range into the desert (Antelope Valley) but had little incentive to do so.” Schiffman and Garfinkel (1980) stated
that the acorn was a major staple which provided the bulk of the vegetative portion of the Kitanemuk diet. They further reported that fish and game were of fairly minor dietary significance.

Our composite view of the ethnographic Kitanemuk subsistence pattern would be an economy based primarily on gathering, with the importance of fishing and waterfowl hunting being uncertain. Mammal hunting would have been a minor economic pursuit. The ethnographic Kitanemuk settlement pattern would have consisted of a number of semi-permanent villages located in the Tehachapi Mountains with small seasonal sites located so as to exploit specific resources. The desert area was clearly considered ephemeral.

Other aspects of ethnographic Kitanemuk culture important in this study include burial customs and social structure, especially ranking and status. Burial customs are briefly mentioned by Kroeber (1925) who reported that the Yokuts said that the Kitanemuk interred corpses. Additional data from Blackburn and Bean (1978:566) suggest that the Kitanemuk used cemeteries and interred corpses in a tightly flexed position, the body being "doubled up and tied" prior to burial. Blackburn and Bean

Fig. 1. Ethnographic Kitanemuk territorial assignments.
(1978:566) stated that the Kitanemuk "carried the body to the cemetery; as they neared it, one of them cried out to warn the dead of their arrival." This seems to imply that the cemetery was located some distance from the village.

Ceremonial cannibalism was also practiced by the ethnographic Kitanemuk. At the grave, the skull of the corpse was broken open with a stone "... each mourner (receiving) a tiny portion of the brain to eat" (Blackburn and Bean 1978:566). Grave offerings were interred with the body. A grave pole was erected at the head of a chief's grave (Blackburn and Bean 1978). The pole, about 20 feet long and six inches in diameter, was obtained from the mountains and erected at the grave after several ceremonies. C. H. Merriam (1955:77-86) described a similar ceremony among the Gabrielinos and Serrano about 1906.

The data on ethnographic Kitanemuk social organization are scant. It must have been fairly complex as each village had a chief, a ceremonial manager, two messengers, shamans, diviners, and other ritualists (Blackburn and Bean 1978). Social ranking and prestige systems were apparently well developed.

ARCHEOLOGICAL DATA

There have been no sites excavated in the Tehachapi Mountain area claimed by the Kitanemuk. Virtually all of the archaeological work in the Kitanemuk area has been done in the Antelope Valley.

Archaeological research has been conducted in Antelope Valley since the 1930's although the majority of the work has been done since 1968. Several dozen sites have been excavated by Antelope Valley College where the recovered material is stored. Unfortunately, most of these important data are not available in the literature and secondary sources must be relied upon. The major sources of reported archaeological data include the research program at Cerro Coso College, the Cultural Resource Management Program at Edwards Air Force Base, and a variety of environmental impact reports.

For this study, the relevant archaeological data include settlement patterns and a comparison of archaeological traits with the ethnographic data. Mortuary data, especially location and content of cemeteries, are very important.

The majority of known archaeological remains in the Antelope Valley appear to date earlier than 300 B.P. (Sutton 1979a) and include at least three major villages and numerous special purpose sites. Since no historic materials have been found at the large villages, it would be reasonable to assume that 300 B.P. could represent a terminal date of major valley occupation. For the purpose of this paper, our discussion will be confined to those sites which were occupied during the late prehistoric period, between 2200 and 300 B.P.

The late prehistoric period settlement pattern that can be extrapolated from an examination of the extant archaeological data is one of large permanent (or semi-permanent) villages with a variety of smaller special purpose sites occupied on a seasonal basis (Robinson 1977). The presence of large villages (which include cemeteries) and the number and complexity of other sites would suggest that the Antelope Valley supported a large population during the late prehistoric period, and was not a "fringe" area as suggested by the ethnographic data. The economic base supporting such a population is not yet understood but the heavy involvement in trade networks suggested by Robinson (1977) may be an important factor. Obsidian from the Coso area may have been an important commodity as Antelope Valley is situated along a natural trade route.

Large permanent populations may not be as unusual for desert areas as once thought. Bettinger (1978) suggested that some groups may have employed a Desert Village adaptive strategy characterized by large permanent settlements and specialized economies. This
would contrast with the Desert Culture strategy (Jennings 1957) characterized by small population aggregates and unspecialized subsistence strategies. Although an examination of Bettinger's ideas with respect to the Antelope Valley is well beyond the scope of this paper, it is an interesting point to keep in mind.

There are three major late prehistoric period village sites, or complexes, known for the Antelope Valley. Two of these villages, LAn-488 and Ker-303, are located in the western part of the valley. The third, perhaps more aptly described as a site complex, is associated with the playa complex on Edwards Air Force Base. There are also a number of special purpose sites documented for the late prehistoric period including the large rhyolite quarry in the Fairmont Buttes (Robinson, Sutton, and Eggers 1976; Sutton 1978) and lithic scatters (e.g., Sutton 1979a). These sites reflect an intensive use of the resources within the valley during the late prehistoric period, most probably in conjunction with the major villages.

The major village of LAn-488 is located along the southwestern fringe of the valley. The site was tested in 1969-70 by Antelope Valley College, yielded a \(^{14}\)C date of 770 ± 90 radiocarbon years (A.D. 1180) (GAK-3010), and was attributed to the Kitanemuk (Robinson 1972). The deposit was three meters in depth in some areas and no structures were recorded. A small cemetery was discovered within the village and contained two adults and two children (Robinson 1972). Three of the burials (two adults and one child) had only a few associated artifacts. The fourth was a small infant and had more than five thousand small Olivella spp. beads associated with the burial (Robinson 1972). The beads were very small and had to be recovered with 1/16-inch screen. This offering represents great wealth and seems indicative of ascribed status (Robinson 1972). Numerous other trade items (shell and steatite) were recovered at the site. It is clear that the inhabitants of LAn-488 were wealthy and status oriented. Interment within the midden is also an important point.

The other major village known in the western valley is Ker-303, located in a small group of hills protruding southward onto the valley floor. Ker-303 was tested by Antelope Valley College from 1972 to 1977, and by the author (in cooperation with Antelope Valley College through Cerro Coso College in 1977-78). There are a number of small ephemeral sites located around Ker-303 including rock rings, small lithic scatters, and milling stations (Serfoss 1972).

The main site area at Ker-303 is several acres in extent, contained a large cemetery, and has a deposit over two meters deep in some places. Three structures were located by test excavation. Given the size of the excavation sample (about 2.5%), one could assume that more structures are present.

Numerous trade items were also recovered at Ker-303 including Haliotis, Tivela, Olivella, Megathura, Mytilus, and Dentalium shell beads and ornaments, steatite, and obsidian. This trade apparently involved the Santa Barbara coast, the San Joaquin Valley, and the desert to the east. Large quantities of other artifacts were also recovered including Rose Spring and Cottonwood projectile points. Several radiocarbon dates place the occupation of Ker-303 from about 2200 B.P. to 300 B.P.

The cemetery at Ker-303 is especially important due to its wealth of data on status. Over 30 burials were recovered in controlled excavation although many were damaged. As many as 100 may have originally been interred there, since the majority of the cemetery had been destroyed by pothunting. There are indications that redwood posts and/or planking were associated with several of the burials (Anonymous 1972). Some of the badly decomposed red-colored wood was tentatively identified by the Los Angeles County Museum as redwood although it is possible
that the wood may actually be cedar. This wood may be evidence of the Kitanemuk practice of placing posts over the graves of chiefs.

A burial complex of six individuals was also recovered from Ker-303 (Robinson 1973). It is not known, however, if these individuals were interred at the same time. A knapping tool kit, including several dozen antler tools, several hammerstones, numerous flakes, and chipped stone tools, an awl, and a piece of asphaltum was found associated with one of the burials (Robinson 1973) suggesting some sort of specialization.

Perhaps the most unusual burial recovered at Ker-303 consisted of an adult female interred with the head down and the hips up. Both of the legs had been severed at the knees prior to burial and placed on top of the body. The artifacts recovered in association with this burial are indicative of great wealth. Over 1500 *Mytilus* beads, over 1000 *Olivella* beads, and numerous *Haliotis* and *Limpet* ornaments were found (Robinson 1973).

Cutting of a body prior to burial is unusual but not unique. There are several examples from Medea Creek (King 1969), although the specific details of mutilation differ. It is suggested by King (1969:61) that the mutilation of the body represents “a very special social identity...” Explanations offered for the mutilation include war, execution, or murder (King 1969).

Most of the burials at Ker-303 were placed in a tightly flexed to loosely flexed position. Many were too damaged or otherwise decomposed to obtain good orientation and sex data. There was no evidence to suggest that any ceremonial cannibalism such as described for the ethnographic Kitanemuk (Blackburn and Bean 1978) was practiced, although the condition of the burials may have precluded such observations.

The content of the Ker-303 cemetery indicates that the inhabitants were wealthy, and probably maintained a complex ranking system. Several specific traits (e.g., posts over some burials and interment instead of cremation) are similar to the ethnographic Kitanemuk but there are many traits (e.g., size, complexity) that are dissimilar.

The third major village area actually consists of several sites recorded along the south shore of Buckhorn Dry Lake on the eastern fringe of the valley. The sites may represent a single massive site, but possibly are best explained as a very intensively occupied seasonal site complex. With only very limited work at the lake sites as a data base, it is very difficult to compare them with the western villages. South of Buckhorn Lake there are large midden accumulations ranging to a meter in depth. Mesquite was undoubtedly a major attraction around the lakes as extensive stands still remain.

Some very limited testing has been conducted at several of these sites. LAn-828 was tested in 1972 (Eggers n.d.). Little data are available on the results of that work other than the discovery of cremations with burned *Olivella* beads observed in association. Chester King dated some of the recovered beads from LAn-828 as ca. 200 B.C. to A.D. 600 (Greenwood and McIntyre 1980).

Limited testing was undertaken at LAn-771 located several hundred meters south of LAn-828 (Sutton 1979c). No human remains were recovered, but the site did contain a variety of artifacts including trade items. A clay figurine fragment was recovered and is very similar to one recovered at Ker-303 (Sutton 1979d). This may provide a link to the western villages but the mortuary customs appear to be different for the lakes area.

Several other sites provide mortuary data that are significant to this study. Toney (1968) conducted excavations at LAn-192, a large campsite with burials near Lake Los Angeles. Toney (1968) assigned the occupation to the late prehistoric period. Of the nine burials
recovered, five (four adults and one child) were interred in a small common grave with many associated grave goods. The child had a shroud consisting of 1101 spirelopped *Olivella* spp. beads placed on the pubic area, a necklace containing 2135 *Olivella* spp. shell beads, 54 more *Olivella* spp. beads near the cranium, and four bird bone tools in general association (Toney 1968). Several other artifacts present, including more *Olivella* spp. beads and a metate, could not be associated with specific individuals. One of the adults had an obsidian projectile point lodged in the chest cavity. It is interesting to note that most of the offerings, representing considerable wealth, were associated with the child.

A Tataviam cemetery (LAn-487), located in the Sierra Pelona Mountains just south of Antelope Valley, was salvaged by Antelope Valley College in 1971. The cemetery is not directly associated with a habitation site. This is in contrast with sites in Antelope Valley proper, and near the lakes, where human remains were found in the village midden. Fifteen burials were recovered at LAn-487 but only six by controlled excavation. The other nine were removed by pothunters although some data on one of those were recovered. Four of the seven burials with data contained grave goods which were meager compared with some of the burials from LAn-488 or Ker-303. The single infant burial recovered from LAn-487, contained no offerings. Of the five burials with observable position; four were tightly flexed in a sitting position, and one was loosely flexed in a prone position.

The grave goods with the males consisted primarily of chipped stone tools, while the offerings with the female consisted of shell beads and ornaments. No firm dating is available for the site, although it is probably late (Robinson 1972). Robinson (1972) suggests that ascribed status is not represented at the site, in contrast with the cemetery at LAn-488 (discussed above) which he uses for comparison.

Another cemetery was excavated by Antelope Valley College in 1975. This site (LAn-767) is located just into the foothills on the southwestern fringe of the Antelope Valley. While the cemetery itself is isolated, several other sites, including camps, are located nearby. No direct relationship can currently be shown between the cemetery and the other sites. Eleven burials were recovered at LAn-767, seven of which were disturbed by stream action. The four intact burials were interred in a tightly to loosely flexed position with a variety of orientation. Few artifacts were recovered, mostly *Olivella* spp. beads, a few with incised edges. None of the burials had grave goods associated in quantity and no apparent pattern of artifact distribution with regard to either sex or age was evident (R. W. Robinson, 1980, personal communication). This cemetery is quite similar to the Tataviam cemetery (LAn-487) excavated in 1971 (Robinson 1972). It is possible that the LAn-767 site was also Tataviam.

Two other Tataviam cemeteries south of the Antelope Valley are discussed by King, Smith, and King (1974). The cemeteries are not located directly in habitation areas but are nearby. King, Smith, and King (1974) indicate that a number of high status items were recovered and that the social system was fairly complex. The cemeteries at LAn-487 and LAn-767 do not seem to exhibit these traits.

**DISCUSSION**

I would suggest that the late prehistoric period population of Antelope Valley was ancestral to the ethnographic Kitanemuk. Thomas Blackburn (1980 personal communication) feels that the late prehistoric period Antelope Valley populations were more likely proto-Tataviam. The mortuary data would indicate that the Tataviam held portions of the foothills and valley floors near Palmdale, but probably not the majority of the valley, during the late prehistoric period.
It seems likely that the major territorial base of the Kitanemuk system moved from the Antelope Valley to the Tehachapi Mountains about 300 B.P. Due to the paucity of archaeological data from the Tehachapis, it is unclear if the Kitanemuk retreated into the mountains they had already occupied or moved into an entirely new area, perhaps displacing another group. It is also possible that the prehistoric Antelope Valley populations were not Kitanemuk (as Blackburn suggested) and that after the collapse of the valley cultural system, the Kitanemuk of the Tehachapis expanded their territory to include part of the valley vacated by this other group.

If the Antelope Valley populations were ancestral to the Kitanemuk, considerable cultural change must have taken place after their move into the Tehachapis. The economic base may have changed from a prestigious wealth-oriented trading economy to primarily a gathering economy. While the ethnographic data suggest that Kitanemuk prestige and status systems were well developed, the economic base would seem insufficient to support such complex social and political systems. These social systems may be remnants of proto-Kitanemuk traits which were based on a more highly developed economic system, one originating during their tenure in the Antelope Valley.

It has been suggested that Antelope Valley populations were heavily involved in southern California trade and may have served as middlemen in that network (Robinson 1977). The “middleman” role may have provided the economic base needed to support a complex social system in the desert, although such systems may not be that unusual (Bettinger 1978).

The major occupation in the Antelope Valley appears to have ended prior to contact, about 300 B.P. (Sutton 1979a). After that time the valley was utilized only on an ephemeral basis, as reflected in the ethnographic record. The causal factors in this possible abandonment are unknown, but if the Antelope Valley populations were economically dependent upon trade networks, any disruption of these networks may have resulted in the collapse of the cultural system forcing the populations to move.

Disruption of trade networks may not have been the only destabilizing factor operating in the Antelope Valley. Thomas Blackburn (personal communication, 1980) suggested that disease epidemics may have played a role. While there is currently no empirical evidence to support this, the time factor of 300 B.P. offered as a terminal date for the major Antelope Valley occupation (Sutton 1979a) roughly coincides with Spanish intrusions along the coast and the Colorado River. It has been shown by Dobyns (1963a, 1963b) that diseases could disrupt or destroy populations well in advance of actual contact with the Spanish. If Antelope Valley populations were heavily involved in trade, they may have received diseases fairly early.

The disruption of Antelope Valley culture may have occurred at approximately the same time as the desiccation of Lake Cahuilla. Wilke (1978) suggests that the drying of Lake Cahuilla may have had widespread repercussions throughout southern California. It may be that the Antelope Valley, although somewhat far removed from Lake Cahuilla, was also affected by the desiccation of the lake.

There is still another intriguing hypothesis. Chester King (personal communication, 1980) suggested the possibility that the Antelope Valley populations were physically removed en masse by the Spanish in 1811. King stated that mission records showed that a large group of Serrano (Kitanemuk?) were brought to the San Fernando Mission in 1811 from a village at Willow Springs (near Rosamond). King also suggested that two other villages in the valley were concurrently occupied and engaged in an intermarriage system with the Willow Springs...
group. The Spanish action may have effectively depopulated the valley very suddenly.

The A.D. 1700 date proposed for the general depopulation of the Antelope Valley was based on a 300 B.P. \(^{14}\)C date from Ker-303 (U.C.L.A. 1884a) and the lack of historic trade items at any of the known villages. It would seem possible that the valley population was removed by the Spanish before much trade had occurred, and that the absence of historic material would not be unusual. While this is an interesting possibility, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

An examination of the mortuary data from the known cemeteries in the valley allows us to make some preliminary late prehistoric period territorial assignments for the Tataviam and Antelope Valley populations (proto-Kitanemuk). These suggested boundaries are shown in Fig. 2 and should be considered very preliminary. The northern portions of the proto-Kitanemuk boundary are based on the ethnographic data, as archaeological data are lacking. The proto-Kitanemuk cemeteries seem to be located within villages (although the ethnographic data suggested that Kitanemuk...
cemeteries were located away from the habitation area) and usually contain grave goods. Tataviam cemeteries seem to be located away from habitation sites and contain far fewer offerings.

The proto-Kitanemuk probably held the western Antelope Valley including the Tehachapi foothills, the foothills in the southwest Antelope Valley, and the majority of the valley floor eastward to the lakes. This is suggested by the location and content of the LAn-488 and Ker-303 cemeteries. The cemeteries at LAn-487 and LAn-767 indicate that the Tataviam held the Sierra Pelonas and the Palmdale area in addition to the territory delineated in King and Blackburn (1978:fig. 1). This is in general agreement with King, Smith, and King (1974) that the Tataviam wintered on the plains of the Antelope Valley.

The situation in the eastern Antelope Valley during the late prehistoric period is more confused. It would appear that the area around the lakes was heavily utilized although it is not clear by whom. It seems possible that the lakes were concurrently claimed and used by several groups other than the Kitanemuk, perhaps the Vanyume and/or the Kawaiisu. This occupation would most probably have been in late spring to exploit the large mesquite stands and waterfowl. The presence of cremations at LAn-828 would suggest visitations by groups from outside the valley.

CONCLUSION

The ethnographic record suggests that the Kitanemuk did not occupy the Antelope Valley during the proto-historic period, and the archaeological record supports this position. The archaeological record indicates, however, that the Antelope Valley did support a large population during the late prehistoric period (2200-300 B.P.) which may have later abandoned the valley. This population, probably proto-Kitanemuk, maintained complex social and economic systems capable of supporting large permanent populations and complex trade networks. It is hypothesized that the proto-Kitanemuk abandoned the Antelope Valley circa 300 B.P., shifting their major territorial and economic base to the Tehachapi Mountain area, although the causal factors for such a shift are unknown.

The hypotheses presented here are quite preliminary and based upon incomplete data. They will serve, I hope, to generate research and thought on this area so that a better understanding of the region’s prehistory can result.

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NOTE

1. I have purposely included some archaeological data in this paper mostly heretofore unavailable in the literature. My purpose in this is to make these important data available to other researchers.

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