Prehistory of the Southern Bight: Models for a New Millennium

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THE GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS OF THIS CHAPTER IS California's Southern Bight, roughly the southern half of the arc extending from the Mexican border to Point Conception. As defined here, this region encompasses Orange and San Diego Counties, western Riverside County, and the offshore islands of Santa Catalina, San Clemente, and San Nicolas (the Southern Channel Islands). At the time of Spanish contact this region was occupied by native groups (Figures 14.1, 14.2) most commonly referred to as the Tongva (Gabrielino), Juaneño (Ajachemen), Luiseño, and Kumeyaay (Bean and Shipek 1978; Bean and Smith 1978; Kroeber 1925; Laumala 1978; McCawley 1996). Our objective in this chapter is to present a regional summary of research on California prehistory since the appearance of Moratto's (1984) *California Archaeology* and Chartkoff and Chartkoff's (1984) *The Archaeology of California*.

The Southern Bight is remarkably well suited to such a retrospective analysis. This region illustrates a number of important research advances that have been made since the appearance of those two volumes. Data from this area allow us to assess in considerable detail some of the ideas advanced by Moratto and the Chartkoffs. At the same time, however, these studies have generated data that provoke fundamentally different understandings of California prehistory than those in the decades leading up to publication of the two 1984 books. These advances, outlined below, seem likely to propel archaeological research in new directions in the new millennium.

Though they expressed differing perspectives, *California Archaeology* and the *Archaeology of California* were the most comprehensive and also the first statewide syntheses of California prehistory. Both appeared at a time when California archaeology was on the cusp of enormous changes. Following the 1970s, the field experienced an explosive proliferation of archaeological information under the aegis of contract archaeology, the "radiocarbon revolution," and the appearance of a large cadre of archaeologists holding diverse theoretical viewpoints. The result, signaled by the appearance of the two books, was the rise of California archaeology as an intellectual force in its own right. They not only reflected the transformation of California archaeology but also sketched pathways along which research would develop over the following two decades, posing interesting questions about the nature and timing of prehistoric culture change. Chartkoff and Chartkoff (1984), for example, emphasized broad patterns of progressive cultural development, culminating in Late Holocene cultural climaxes characterized by high degrees of adaptive success. By contrast, Moratto (1984:460–464) suggested that culture change may have been more regionally and temporally variable than previously thought, and included episodes of culture change caused by such factors as climatic stresses. One of the most prescient questions posed by Moratto (1984:104–113) was whether a Paleo-Coastal Tradition actually had existed along the California coastline during the Early Holocene, breaking sharply with traditional views of seafaring and intensive maritime adaptations as Late Holocene developments. In the discussion that follows, we point out the ways in which researchers working in the Southern Bight have made significant progress in addressing the following questions:

- Was prehistoric culture change relatively gradual and developmental or more punctuated and multidirectional?
- Did trans-Holocene culture change stem essentially from terrestrial cultural adaptations or did the coastlines play an important early role?
- Did prehistoric culture change result in Late Holocene cultural climaxes characterized by high levels of adaptive success or was change induced by resource scarcity?
- Did environmental stresses play an important role in prehistoric culture change or was change driven by essentially intracultural forces?
- Can California prehistory be explained best in terms of broad developmental stages or regional cultural variability?

Creating a coherent picture of these research advances in the study area inevitably forces certain com-