Post-Pleistocene Archeology, 9000 to 2000 B.C.

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In the long interval between 9000 and 2000 B.C. the prehistoric societies of California underwent slow but fundamental changes in their food-getting habits. An initial hunting-based mode of existence was replaced by one emphasizing seed collecting, and this in turn gave way to a variety of subsistence specializations, reflecting improved adjustment to local environments. Modifications in technical culture, settlement patterns, and general life-styles accompanied the economic shifts. Certain ramifications of these alterations and the factors that touched them off remain obscure, for the archeological data are still quite scanty and by no means unequivocal.

Period I: Hunting

The widespread scattered presence of hunting communities in California is attested by the finding of projectile points and other stone implements adapted to the chase at ancient campsites in the northern, central, and southern sections of the state and near its eastern edge. The nature of the hunters' quarry remains conjectural, for animal bones of any kind are scarce. Most probably they stalked and killed large mammals of species still alive. Fossilized bones of extinct animals have been recovered, but they cannot be firmly associated with the artifacts. The size and weight of the missile tips suggest that the weapon was the dart, propelled by a throwing stick. Big-game hunting probably did not constitute the sole economic pursuit. The region's ancient inhabitants must have combined this activity with the taking of lesser mammals and waterfowl as well as with some fishing and collecting of shellfish and vegetal foods. Grinding implements for processing plant foods were, if not unknown, extremely uncommon, strongly suggesting that the rich wild-plant resources were not heavily exploited.

Since very little has been found other than the equipment used in the hunt and for the preparation of the meat and hides of the slain animals, few details concerning the life of these early people are known. Apparently their dwellings were such as to leave few traces in the ground. Only open-air settlements have been recognized though they may occasionally have resorted to shelter beneath rock overhangs or in caves. The absence of deep refuse deposits at the dwelling places points to temporary or brief recurrent occupancy. Sociopolitical inferences are hazardous, but the economics of a simple hunting life must have demanded groups of limited size. Perhaps a few families related by kinship hunted and traveled together. As yet no skeletal remains of the hunters themselves have been certainly identified; therefore, nothing can be said regarding their physical type or mortuary practices.

Two separate hunting traditions, distinguishable primarily on the basis of their typical projectile points, seem to have existed at least in part concurrently and to have overlapped in space. The first is characterized by fluted points that closely resemble the Clovis-Folsom category; leaf-shaped and shouldered forms without longitudinal grooves on their faces mark the second.

Fluted missile tips have been found at two major sites—Borax Lake at the eastern edge of Clear Lake in the coastal ranges of north-central California and Tulare Lake in the southern San Joaquin valley (fig. 1). The Borax Lake settlement lies in a shallow basin that contains the remnant of a lake formed during a time of heavier rainfall. Fifteen fluted points, which seem more in the style of the older Clovis form rather than Folsom (fig. 2), were recovered from its surface and five others were obtained through digging (M.R. Harrington 1948:63–81). Borax Lake also produced a wide array of different projectile types and various other stone articles. The original excavator concluded that the locality had been camped upon by successive parties of hunter-gatherers, attracted by nearby obsidian quarries (M.R. Harrington 1948:117).

The proper cultural and temporal position of Borax Lake has never been agreed upon. A restudy, undertaken in an effort to accurately determine the ancientness of the site, led to the conclusion that neither the geological nor the typological evidence is inconsistent with an antiquity up to 12,000 years for the original occupation (Meighan and Haynes 1970). Obsidian hydration datings give added support to the reasonableness of such an age. The only classes of artifacts regarded as typical of the first period of habitation comprise fluted points and chipped-stone crescents. The crescents, similar to specimens found in early contexts in several parts of western North America, may have functioned as transverse projectile points for stunning waterfowl.

Thirteen complete and 17 fragmentary Clovislike specimens (fig. 3) were collected from the surface of the south shore of Tulare Lake in an area measuring one