

The Archaeology of Anti-Nuclear Protests

by

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Northwest of Las Vegas, in the desert along a lonely stretch of highway, is an undefined space of public land where anti-war groups, anti-nuclear coalitions, environmentalists, and Western Shoshone Indians gather to protest activities at the Nevada Test Site, the United States nuclear weapons testing facility. This place is known as the Peace Camp and more than 200 national and international groups have supported and participated in protests there, beginning in the late 1950s until today. At one time in the 1980s, 8,000 people gathered for a protest.

So, why did archaeologists from the University of Nevada and English Heritage decide to undertake an archaeological study of this Peace Camp? Because of our previous work at military-related archaeological sites, it was felt that protest sites would bring another viewpoint to military history and are a logical corollary to our other work. John became interested in protest activities at Greenham Common Air Base in England and conducted a preliminary archaeological study there. Harold and I, while conducting archaeological work at the Nevada Test Site, would begin and end some days witnessing groups of anti-nuclear activists camping and protesting at the facility's entrance.

While discussions of conducting this research had been on-going for several years between us, the field effort was instigated by Department of Transportation plans to revive two old gravel pits for road construction, an action that would destroy parts of the camp. DOT archaeologists conducted a survey and concluded that no archaeological or historical remains were present. Our inquiry into these results, with an explanation of the potential importance of the Peace Camp, resulted in strong statements by the agency archaeologist against the Peace Camp being historically significant or even worthy of consideration as an archaeological site.

Nevertheless, we conducted two field sessions at the Camp in 2002. When we began, we estimated its size to be 8 hectares with 60 features. Our survey revealed the camp covers 240 hectares with 765 features. The abundance of features surprised us and included camping locales, sweat

lodges, rock cairns, pathways, geoglyphs, and artistic objects left in the desert.

We suspected that by conducting an archaeological study of a politicized landscape that our work would attract some attention. But we did not imagine that it would create its own political milieu. On the first day of fieldwork a deputy sheriff assigned to work at the Test Site came to see what we were doing at the Peace Camp. When we explained, his response was to express interest in our research and he shared stories about various protests and recommended persons we might want to talk to about their experiences.

Several days later, a large, red pickup truck zoomed up to our work area and a very angry Shoshone Indian exited the vehicle. A strong activist for Western Shoshone interests, he demanded to know why we were there and what right we had doing our work. Our attempts to communicate with him failed, especially after he learned we were archaeologists, and he left angrier than when he arrived.

A week after this, Corbin Harney, the spiritual leader for the Western Shoshone, came to the Peace Camp to conduct a morning sunrise service to which we were invited. Corbin conducted the service and then spoke to us regarding his feelings about the land, the activities at the Test Site, and the Western Shoshone Indians. This was our first opportunity to talk to people who stay at the Peace Camp and protest at the entrance to the Test Site. It quickly became apparent that the protesters interpreted our interest in the Peace Camp as our personal commitment to their cause and began telling us stories about the Camp and their actions against the Test Site. I knew that some of the stories would not have been told to me if they had known that I am also involved in conducting archaeological research on the Test Site. This was a particularly uncomfortable experience because many protesters are wary of Test Site workers.

Before our first field season ended, a reporter from a Las Vegas newspaper who had covered the protests came out to do a story on our research. This article ran as a feature in a Sunday edition and included the fact that Harold and I also conduct archaeological work at the Test Site. Subsequent to this article, we received telephone calls and emails from protesters and other reporters. Some understood that we were not the enemy, but others were suspicious of the reasons for the research and of us for our interest in their place. It was implied that we might be collecting information for the government. Nevertheless, protesters' web sites provide a link to this newspaper article and we have even found it listed on web sites as far away as Russia.

The responses to the article from the federal agency that operates the Test Site were mixed. Several individuals offered to talk to us about their experiences during the protests, but management expressed concern regarding our work. The biggest issue was the highlighting of protest

activities by persons who also work at the Test Site. So, Harold and I found ourselves in a situation where the protesters didn't trust us and the government wasn't pleased with our extra-curricular activities. Ironically, the most support came from the Western Shoshone Indian community. Harold and I have worked with the Western Shoshone on their historical interests in the land at the Nevada Test Site for more than a decade. This continued personal contact between some tribal members and us has created a climate of trust.

The awkwardness of the situation was apparent to John and he realized that other aspects of our research, such as interviews and participating in the camp activities during a protest event, have largely fallen upon him. As a foreigner with no apparent political agenda, he may be able to extend our research into areas that Harold and I cannot access.

When we returned for our second field season, we were dismayed to discover that some protest graffiti in drainage tunnels, recorded during our first season of work, had been obliterated by the recent application of gray paint to entire sections of writings and art that had been there for more than two decades. It is probable that pictures of the graffiti in the newspaper article drew attention to it and the Department of Transportation destroyed it. This was an unanticipated impact of our research.

The archaeological study of the Peace Camp exemplifies an issue that confronts contemporary and other types of archaeology, the value of the research to those who hold interest in a site. In this case, some Western Shoshone Indians welcomed the research, recognizing that a study could produce information that would substantiate the area's importance and possibly protect it from governmental actions. Other protesters were distrustful of our motives and some were glad to hear of the study because it would bring attention to the camp, the activities, and their cause. And one protester mentioned that it was good to see that people outside of their community recognized the importance of the Peace Camp.

In addition, there is the issue of a cultural group not wanting certain information made public. At the Peace Camp, there are personal offerings, messages to Mother Earth, and other expressions of personal beliefs.

These are tough issues – the archaeologists as political figures, the effects of our research on a site, and the interests of those who created and use the site. These issues are brought to the forefront when we are working on locations that still are in use, or where there are people who have personal attachments, memories, and emotions about these places.

It has been four years since DOT proposed using the gravel pits at the Peace Camp. Although DOT has reopened a number of pits along the highway, they have so far left the gravel pits at the Peace Camp untouched.



Fig 1 Ceremonial mask. This, like most of the others we found, was in a stone circle. (Photo: Harold Drollinger)



Fig 2 Chi-rho symbol, one of many stone arrangements representing the diversity of religious and cultural groups present at Peace Camp. (Photo: Harold Drollinger)



Fig 3 The 'Shadow Children', a legacy of a visit to Peace Camp by Hiroshima Veterans. (Photo: Harold Drollinger)



Fig 4 Graffiti in the 'Tunnel of Love'. (Photo: John Schofield)