El Mayor: shades of the past

Jay von Werlhof
Imperial Valley College Desert Museum

Introduction

It is rare that the residents of a contemporary village can trace their lineage directly to a prehistoric archaeological site. But this is the case with El Mayor, along Highway 5 between Mexicali and San Felipe. The ancient forerunner is a few hours' walk from the modern village, which was established after the severe floods of the early 1880s forced the inhabitants to relocate to higher ground farther north. Several members of El Mayor Saiz, Portillo, and Tambo lineages trace their families to this period and place.

This little-recognized archaeological site was developed along the banks of a major wash forming from a local crest of Sierra Mayor at 500 m elevation and seasonally flowing into the floodplain at 100 m (Figure 1). The 400-m drop represents a 25% grade within its 1-km journey, resulting in a heavily eroded granitic escarpment above fields of rounded as well as angular boulders, cobbles, pebbles, gravels and sands. On outcrops, ridges and banks above the wash and floodplain, a band of Kwakwarsh Cocopa founded a year-round, self-sustaining village centuries ago.

Environment

Sierra Mayor is a local group of peaks within the north-south Cocopa mountain range which separates Laguna Salada basin and Colorado River delta. The presence of one of America's great rivers belies the point that it flows through one of the continent's driest landscapes. Yet, before the Colorado was tamed with several dams and diversionary canals last century, wet cycles broadly distributed flood waters throughout the deltaic region of northeastern Baja. Northwest of the delta, New and Alamo River overflow channels sent additional flooding waters into Imperial Sink and its southernmost area, Laguna Salada basin.

Where Sierra Mayor and the delta meet, the average daily temperature from late May to early September runs over 100°F. From fall to late spring, the average wavers around 55°, and even in adverse times rarely dips to freezing. Various species and populations of birds, animals, insects and plants gave indigenous settlers within this area basic supplies throughout the year. The modern village of El Mayor is along the banks of Río Hardy; the prehistoric village was situated 3 km from Colorado River and its fish resources, but the presence of fragmented fish bone and clam shell show that distance was no deterrent to acquiring riverine supplies. In addition, trails through sierran passes into the western mountain villages of the southern Kumeyaay and Paipai enabled these societies to exchange differing trade items of food and material goods.

Exploitation activities

Bows and arrows, sharpened spear sticks, woven snares and curved throwing sticks were

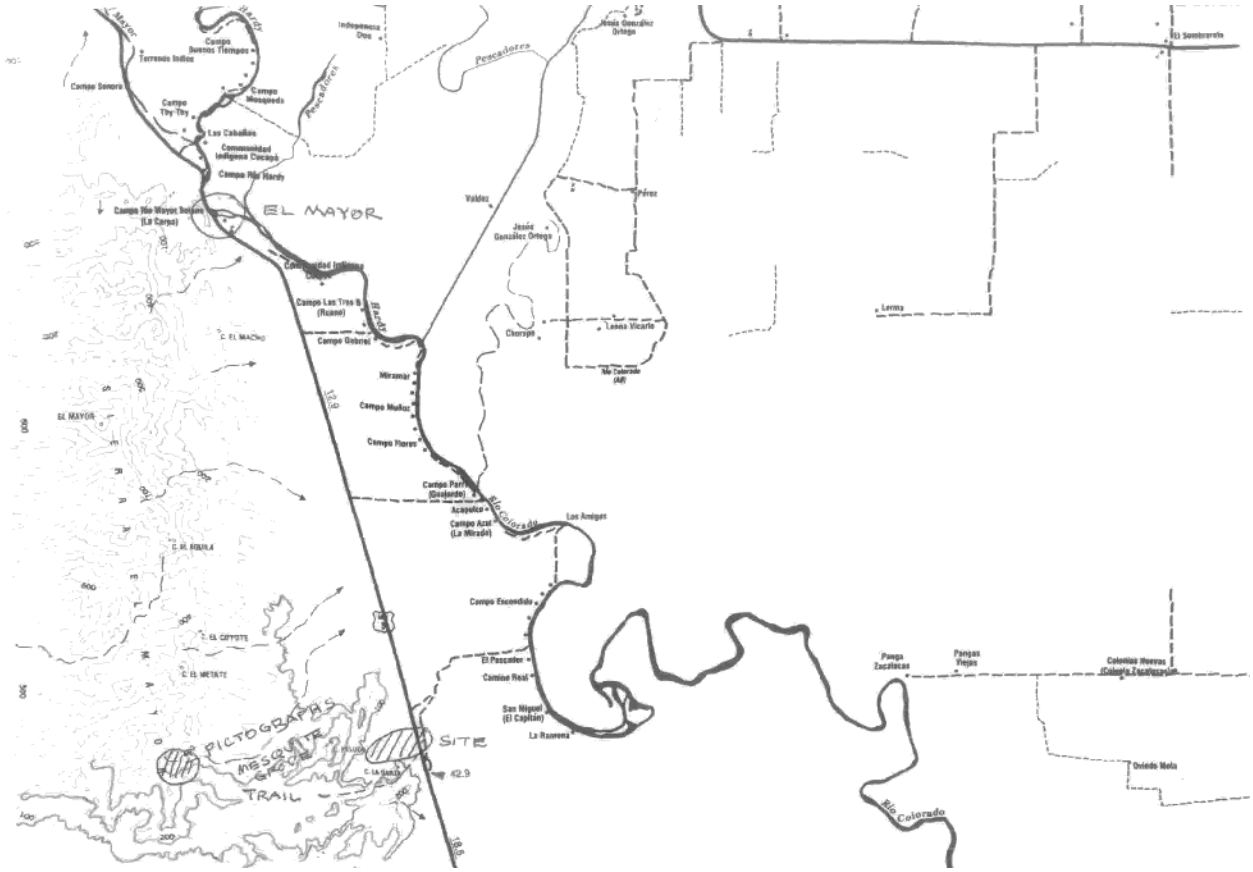

Figure 1. Location of El Mayor site.

commonly used in pursuit of animals. These and other locally made equipment are on display at El Mayor Museum. Birds and fish were usually snared, though occasionally shot or speared. Pods knocked from mesquite trees were collected in baskets as the major source of locally gathered raw foods. Knives and choppers shaped from stone were tools used in harvesting marsh vegetation and roots. Perhaps the most common of all wares were the mortar/pestle and metate/mano, both of which are found in bedrock or portable forms. Digging sticks were necessary for horticultural activity and useful in collecting veins of clay for the ceramic industry. Roots, vines and split reeds were common bases for preparing woven basketry, an ancient ware as trays or containers. These and other evidence of exploitation activities were all cultural adaptations to a harsh environment as experienced in northeastern Baja California. These adaptive forms provided Cocopa with sustaining means over as yet unknown time.

Trails

A series of hills forming the south edge of this archaeological site exposes the main trail connecting this ancient village with the western mountain societies. Beyond the lofty range and across or around Laguna Salada basin, the trail connects this lowland site with Paipai and Kumeyaay mountain habitation villages or camps. This connection was important to the lowlanders as well as the uplanders for exchanging foods and durable goods in seasonal supply. To the Cocopa, this amounted to pine nuts and acorns, hides and feathers, pitch for mastic or waterproofing, dried roots, bulbs, fruits and berries.

Ceramic caches

An unusual means for aging or souring potential clay for ceramics is noted at this archaeological site. In hollows where boulders or cobbles have been washed or dug out of the south bluff line, balls of clay are kept to be later used in making pottery. That they are still there indicates the suddenness in which the settlers vacated this site. A few manos are also tucked in some recesses, probably favorite tools used in grinding clays.

Bedrock mortars, metates and grinding slicks

A large granite boulder along the north edge of the site stands over 1 m high and contains 17 mortar holes and five grinding slicks. The mortars vary from 10 to 60 cm deep, and regardless of size are parabolic in shape. None of the long pestles that would serve the deeper mortars were found, and only three of the smaller ones were located. The missing ones were no doubt collected previously, as were the pots and pans that informants said were once at the site from the historic period of occupancy. No portable mortars or metates were located.

West of the mortar site is a granitic outcrop 12 m high and 30 m long, with steep, jagged sides. There are seven small mortar holes on top. These were perhaps of ceremonial use, for the poor access would minimize their economic use.

At the south base of the outcrop is a small natural recess in which a collection of stones had been placed, and in front of it is a midden deposit. A circle of cobbles forming an interior space of 40 cm was probably for supporting a large olla.

House circles

A slight rise on the southeast edge of the site is the location of seven cleared house circles. The average circumference of 3 m indicates that a full family could occupy each dwelling.

Ceremonial sites

One of the most dramatic parts to the prehistoric site is the nose-piercing ceremonial ground at the base of the sierra. This ceremony was part of the initiation process by which adolescent males transitioned from boys to warriors under the supervision of the “war leader” (Kelly 1977). One design now gone was of two triangles joined at their points. According to El Mayor informants, this was a symbol of Kwakwarsh Cocopa. Earlier recordings included several anthropomorphs, circles and linear designs. Initiation rites were sometimes conducted in alliance with a *kerak* (mourning) ceremony (Kelly 1977).

The clearing noted at this site overlooks the west edge of the riverine floodplain. For the dead, this place was perhaps symbolic of one of the society's main sustenance areas just as the mountain was for the youth, one facing east, the other facing west.

Summary and conclusion

This ancient prehistoric site, which El Mayor elders attest was the original base for this element of Kwakwarsh Cocopa, needs to be protected from further violation. At the same time, it

also needs to be excavated under the guidance of a carefully wrought research design to determine time of foundation, numbers of occupants, external connections, technological evolution and place within the overall Cocopa society.

Reference

Kelly, William
1977 *Cocopa ethnography*, University of Arizona Anthropology Papers 29, Tucson.