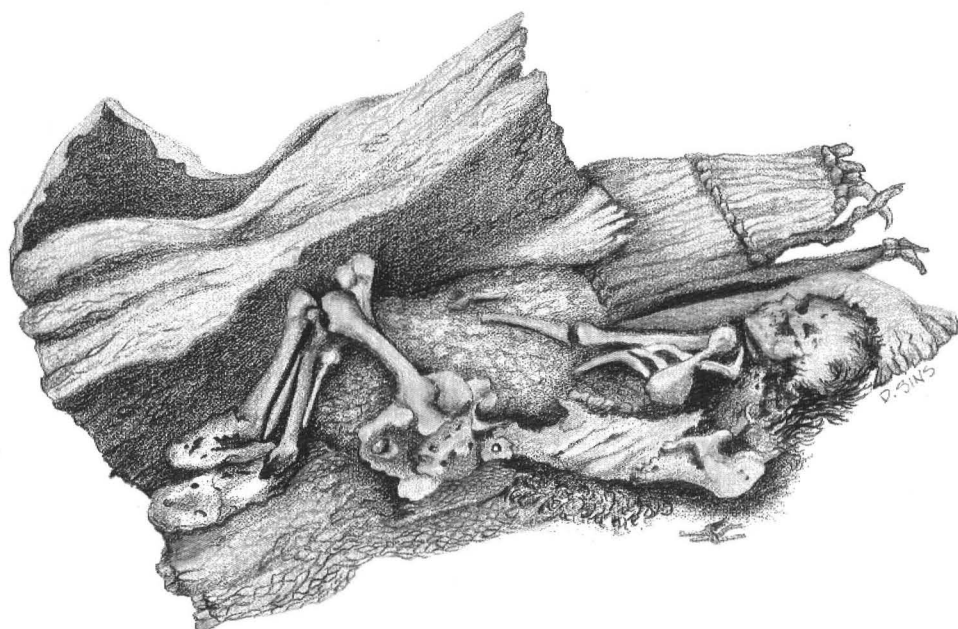


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Historical Society Quarterly



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EARLY HOLOCENE BURIALS IN NEVADA

Overview of Localities, Research and Legal Issues

Amy Dansie

INTRODUCTION

Although we have known for years that human occupation started in the Great Basin before 11,000 years ago (Orr 1974:50; Hattori 1982:13), possibly even 12,000 (Bryan 1974), human bones known to be older than 8,000 years have included only small fragments. The Early Holocene Burial symposium presented at the 1996 Great Basin Anthropological Conference focused on recent advances in knowledge regarding a critical time period in Great Basin anthropology, between 9,000 and 9,500 years ago, based on new dates on human remains in the Nevada State Museum collections. I will provide an introduction to the archaeological localities dating to this time period (Figure 1), and an overview of the current research and legal status of the finds that were covered in this symposium. The articles presented herein are updated and expanded versions of the conference papers, with a few pertinent additions.

THE DISCOVERY

While completing research on Pyramid Lake archaeology, Donald Tuohy submitted samples of several burials for radiocarbon analysis to the Geochron laboratory in 1994, identifying several burials of significant antiquity. That same year, R. E. Taylor from the University of California at Riverside (UCR) was calibrating a new method of dating hair, and requested hair and bone samples from the mummies housed in the Nevada State Museum. Tuohy also resubmitted bone from the oldest Pyramid Lake skeleton, from Wizards Beach, to UCR in order to cross-check the date from the Geochron laboratory. Donna Kirner, of the UCR

The author wishes to thank Donald Tuohy for his unending support and guidance throughout the preparation of this issue. She also wants to thank Donna Kirner for expediting the dating of the materials discussed here and in the next article, above and beyond the call of duty. Finally, she wishes to thank all the authors included in this issue of the *Quarterly* for their cooperation and contributions, fitting this unexpected research into their busy schedules.

radiocarbon lab, describes the methods used in these dating studies in this issue, and in Kirner *et al.* 1996.

These two dating projects produced the oldest dates on intact human remains from Nevada--the oldest known mummy in North America at $9,415 \pm 25$, and two of the fourteen known measurable crania in North America more than 8,000 years old. The hair dating project also produced the first recognized documentation of a new and very ancient textile type, diamond-plaiting, and pushed back the dates of other textile attributes several thousand years from previously known chronologies. Because both of these collections had been in the museum for many years, they emphasize several important issues: (1) the importance of reexamining previous collections, (2) the value of museums for long-term preservation of materials salvaged from destructive activities until resources are available for proper analysis, and (3) a vivid reminder that we should not assume major new discoveries can only happen with new field work. The significance of the dates for diamond-plaited matting and observed skeletal variations has stimulated research designs for a new synthesis of textile, genetic, osteological, archaeological, geographic, and chronometric data for the Great Basin using all the new tools available (Dansie 1997).

While there is much more to learn from these remains, the studies in this issue summarize what we have been able to learn from these and related early Holocene burials in Nevada. I will provide the background details for the collections that serve as the focus for this symposium, specifically the Spirit Cave and Pyramid Lake assemblages.

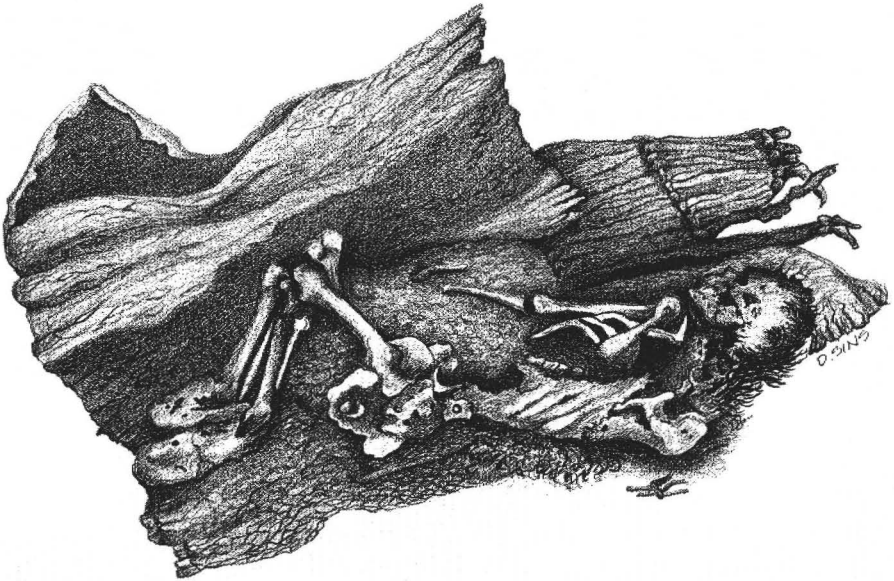
SPIRIT CAVE

In the early part of this century, guano miners and private collectors were rapidly destroying the extraordinary dry cave sites around the Lahontan Basin. The rich prehistoric record of Lovelock Cave was discovered through guano mining (Loud and Harrington 1928). Noting this threat, the State of Nevada developed a salvage archaeology program in the early 1940s.

Spirit Cave was found and excavated by Sydney and Georgia Wheeler in 1940 while conducting salvage archaeology among the dry caves of western Nevada for the Nevada State Parks Commission (Wheeler and Wheeler 1969). Sydney had injured his leg dodging a rattlesnake, causing them to change their plans for a few days. They decided to investigate a small shelter they had noticed from the road near Grimes Point, Churchill County, Nevada. What they found was a remarkable example of arid-climate preservation. As Wheeler's report (reprinted in this issue) describes, they found only a foot below the surface a large piece of matting associated with a set of disturbed human bones. They designated this first burial as Burial no. 1. The Wheelers recorded that they collected the matting, and reburied the human bones in the shelter. Below Burial no. 1 was another, completely intact

burial wrapped in the same type of split-tule and cordage matting. Burial no. 2 is the now famous Spirit Cave mummy, carefully exposed, photographed, and recorded by the Wheelers. Wheeler described the inner matting as twined, but was mistaken, as we shall see. The illustration shows the posture and associated matting of the Spirit Cave mummy.

Near the two burials, Georgia Wheeler found two fine bags carefully placed one on top of the other. One of these bags contained a second bag inside, and both bags contained human cremations. Wheeler described in some detail a feature he believed was the cremation pit where both of the bodies were burned to small fragments. Radiocarbon dates on textile fragments confirm all four of the originally recognized burials are from the same time period, all older than 9,000 years, the cremations dating 375 years younger than the Spirit Cave mummy (see Table 1, Tuohy and Dansie, this issue).



An artist's rendering of the Spirit Cave burial. (*Denise Sins, Nevada State Museum*)

Although Georgia Wheeler, interviewed by phone in May of 1996, claims that she always suspected the mummy was very old, no one else suspected its great age. Sydney published M. R. Harrington's estimate of 1,500-to-2,000 years of age. After Wheeler's brief publication, the mummy was placed in a custom made wooden box, and was eventually stored in the Nevada State Museum. All of Wheeler's records are exceptional in their clarity and systematic organization, despite a few weaknesses in level of detail recorded. The records and other artifacts were placed into general collections storage with the rest of the museum's archaeological system, awaiting further research.

I had often looked at the box, clearly labeled, as it rested in the museum storage facility, knowing the mummies would be studied when scientific methods had advanced enough to do them justice. I had read Wheeler's report, and knew its age estimate. When I opened the box in 1994 for the hair study, I noticed that the interior matting was not twined, as Wheeler stated, but was made with a plain weave or plaiting. I had just read James Adovasio's overview of Great Basin textiles where he said the only plain weave was Lovelock Wickerware. A perusal of the literature revealed that Charles Rozaire (1974) had recognized this type of weave as plaiting in a small piece from Crypt Cave, at Winnemucca Lake, and Stacy Goodman (1985) had noted an even smaller piece in Hidden Cave, at Grimes Point. No one had pursued its significance beyond a sentence or two. We obtained permission from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to date textile fragments in 1996, and found that all the Nevada diamond-plaiting is older than 9,000 years.

STATUS OF SPIRIT CAVE RESEARCH

The new research activity stimulated by the dating projects would have happened eventually anyway, but the timing of this new discovery has important consequences for the future of the archaeological collections associated with human remains. Many of the Spirit Cave artifacts are grave goods, and may be reburied in the future. The textiles are currently being studied in detail by Catherine Fowler and Eugene Hattori; results were presented at the 1997 Society for American Archaeology meetings (Fowler *et al.* 1997). Donald Tuohy and I will summarize the textiles and all the other artifacts from Spirit Cave elsewhere in this issue, followed by Donna Kirner's report on the dates of the bone and other textiles associated with Spirit Cave. She will also discuss the different dates for Wizards Beach.

GRIMES BURIAL SHELTER, 26Ch1C

Another guano-miner discovery related to these early Holocene burials was collected from a small rock shelter on Grimes Point, near Spirit Cave; it was given to Margaret Wheat in 1939, who in turn reported it to Wheeler. He examined the small burial shelter, found only a few more fragments, recorded the site as 1-1C (Cave no. 16), and turned over the matting and human bone to the Nevada State Museum along with the other Nevada State Parks Commission collections in the early 1940s. The site was named Grimes Burial Shelter by Wheeler, and assigned the site number 26Ch1C by the Nevada State Museum. Despite being in plain sight in the museum collections, the matting was not recognized as the diamond-plaiting type until after the dating of the Spirit Cave mummy heightened our awareness of this unique weave. During our search for additional plaiting samples to date in 1995, we discovered the large fragment of matting, and submitted a

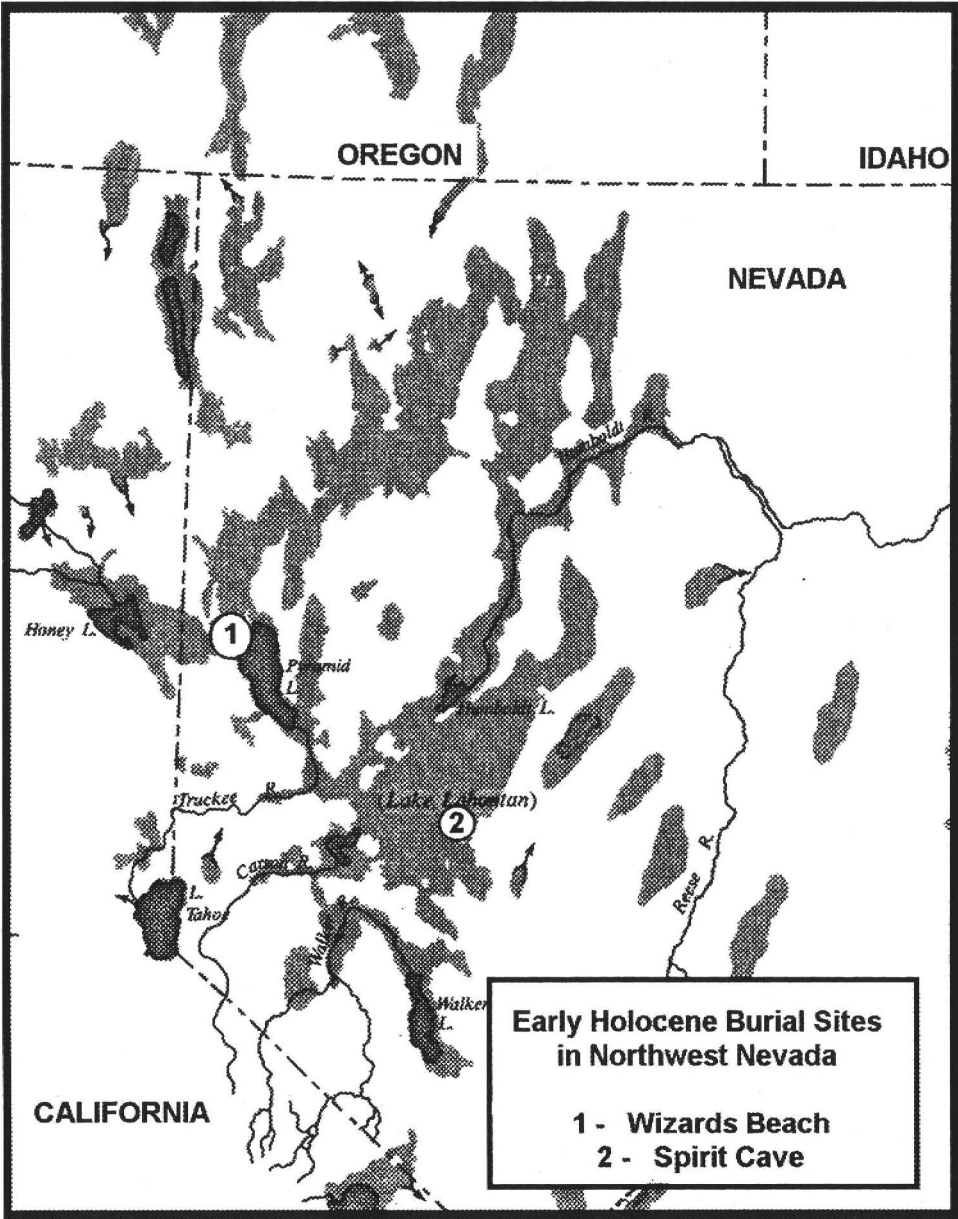
small piece of it to UCR. The date is slightly older than those from Spirit Cave, $9,470 \pm 60$ (UCR-3477/CAMS-33691). Associated with the matting are the well-preserved remains of a child, about ten years old, and small fragments of an older individual.

Further studies will be published later, after Richard Jantz and Douglas Owsley complete their analysis of the Nevada State Museum collections, but this child apparently represents an additional individual from the early Holocene population from western Nevada. The records described the cranium as broken by the guano miners, but it is only cracked, and not significantly damaged. The mandible and about half of the postcranial skeleton were not found in the site by the guano miners or by Wheeler. This site is not to be confused with the Grimes Burial Crevice, 26Ch11, which dates to historic times, the remains of which will be repatriated to the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribes.

WIZARDS BEACH

The skeletons from Wizards Beach, on the northwest end of Pyramid Lake, Nevada, were found by avocational archaeologist Peter Ting during a low lake stand in 1968 and were reported to the University of Nevada, Reno. Robert Stevenson of the Nevada Archaeological Survey recorded and collected the exposed bones. His map shows the relationship of the two skeletons and an isolated femur, Burials A, B, and C, about 80 yards apart. The bones suffered significant wave erosion as the lake lowered. Four radiocarbon assays on Burial B dated between 9,100 and 9,500 years ago, but only two dates on total amino acids were used to determine the average age, $9,250 \pm 60$ and $9,200 \pm 60$ obtained by Richard Burky at UCR (Tuohy and Dansie, Table 1, this issue). The more complete Burial A was dated to almost 6,000 years. Those of you familiar with Wizards Beach may recall that this same setting produced two 24,500-year-old *Camelops* skeletons and a complete Pleistocene horse, now on display at the Nevada State Museum (Dansie *et al.* 1988).

No artifacts were found with the Wizards Beach skeletons. A reported "effigy" was a natural lump of tufa, the same calcium carbonate material that coats the Needles and the Pyramid. The bones were disarticulated when found, and unfortunately no reliable indicators of specific mortuary behavior were preserved. Other artifacts from Wizards Beach include finely crafted obsidian Northern Side notched points, Pinto points, and large bone spear points, with a length of sagebrush fishing cordage dated at $9,660 \pm 170$ B.P. (Tuohy 1988:212). Bone fish gorgets and hooks and stone sinkers of unknown age are also common in this corner of Pyramid Lake. All these data suggest a possible early Holocene fishing economy developing, or surviving, around the remnant lakes as they receded from Lake Lahontan levels.



ISSUES AND CURRENT RESEARCH

Grimes Point is on BLM land and all its archaeological resources are subject to federal laws protecting America's prehistoric heritage. Because of the sensitive political climate surrounding the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the international publicity the Spirit Cave dates generated, in 1996 the Bureau of Land Management decided that further consumptive analysis of burials from BLM land should be processed under tribal consultation, citing the federal curation regulations which require written permission to perform consumptive analysis on collections falling under the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 (ARPA). Representatives of the Northern Paiute have asserted that all of the burials are Paiute regardless of age, and expressed strong objections to conducting DNA analysis of the burials. The Nevada State Museum request for BLM permission to conduct DNA analysis on the Spirit Cave remains was neither approved nor denied, pending completion of the official NAGPRA inventory publication in the Federal Register. That stage has now been completed, and no action has been taken as of this writing (March 1997). The Spirit Cave and Grimes Burial Shelter burials are inventoried as unidentified, with ethnic affiliation undetermined. Jantz and Owsley (this issue) document why affiliation of the early Holocene remains is uncertain. Legally, all non-consumptive analyses are allowed to proceed, and this issue reports all such studies completed to date.

Several years ago, the Nevada State Museum had already submitted samples for DNA analysis from non-BLM land in western Nevada, including the Pyramid Lake Reservation, as part of Tuohy's long-term study of Pyramid Lake prehistory conducted under Tribal Council approval. These DNA analyses were conducted under the NAGPRA provision for completion of studies of major importance. Fredrika Kaestle's article will report on the DNA studies of the non-BLM burials. The issue of affiliation between the ancient burials and the modern tribes is a complex one, both legally and scientifically, as well as emotionally and spiritually, and it remains to be seen if genetic studies will be included in such evaluations.

Additional studies of the early Holocene burials include analysis of materials found in the associated sediments. Samples of organic matter from the sediments around the skeletal (non-mummified) lower part of the Spirit Cave mummy were determined during analysis to be human coprolites. Peter Wigand and Sunday Eiselt will report on these studies in this issue. In a related vein, Lew Napton will present an overview of coprolite studies that will compare the Spirit Cave remains with other Lahontan basin studies.

Immediately after the dates of the Spirit Cave and Pyramid Lake burials were known, I contacted Gentry Steele, a specialist in Paleoindian physical anthropology. Through a generous grant from the Calhoun Foundation (formerly the Truman Orr foundation) we were able to bring Steele to Nevada for a thorough examination

of these two ancient people. As part of our long-term documentation of Nevada burials, we were also able to bring Heather Edgar, physical anthropologist and former student of Sheilagh Brooks, to do a comparative study of a series of forty-four burials, including the Spirit Cave and Wizards Beach burials. Her travel was also supported by a Calhoun Foundation grant.

When the news of the Spirit Cave mummy's age was published in the national press, Douglas Owsley of the Smithsonian Institution read with interest about the Paiute claims of ancestry. His work with Richard Jantz on the craniofacial structure of Native American populations showed that known populations can be distinguished based on statistical analysis of cranial measurements. He offered to examine our series of human remains to evaluate affiliation with living tribal groups. One more Calhoun Foundation grant brought him and his team of experts to Nevada in 1996 and in 1997. We are pleased to be able to include their summary of findings in this issue.

These burials are potentially subject to repatriation under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. After the presentations in October, Alan Schneider, a lawyer with extensive experience in NAGPRA matters, presented an overview of legal issues. There is no avoiding the complex and sensitive issues regarding Native American spiritual values and legal rights under current legislation. Although NAGPRA provides for the transition from science to repatriation, there are issues of critical importance to the study of human occupation of the New World to which these and other early Holocene burials are pivotal. The recent find of the Kennewick Man skeleton, about 9,000 years old, on the Columbia River is directly relevant to these early Nevada burials. Although the Kennewick Man was found after the passage of NAGPRA, and hence falls under different provisions of the law, the question of affiliation remains a key issue. The affiliation of these ancient people, with compellingly Caucasoid traits, will be a topic of debate, and court action, for some time. While these ancient humans may be ancestors of living Indians, they are physically different enough that it has not yet been established to whom they are most closely related, nor if they left any descendants. Because of these preliminary findings, Schneider pointed out that it remains to be established whether NAGPRA even applies to such ancient remains.

While the legal resolution of these issues remains unclear, it is quite apparent that a serious conflict between cultures has developed. At the heart of the issue are basic definitions of humanity and spirituality. On the one hand, scientists feel the destruction of rare and irreplaceable information from ancient times violates the right to learn about human origins. On the other hand, many Native Americans are more concerned about additional profanations of their ancestors. Yet it is too simple to reduce the discussion to a choice between treating human remains as simply objects for study or as vessels for departed spirits. As we go to press, the United States District Court case in Oregon regarding Kennewick Man remains

open after a second hearing. The judge denied two motions: by the Army Corps of Engineers for summary judgment to dismiss and by the scientists involved to allow immediate access to the remains for further study. The court seems intent on developing the record fully in this complex case, leaving open the possibility for later study, once the issues are more clearly delineated.

Although NAGPRA conveys rights to demonstrable descendants to rebury their ancestors, establishing and verifying lines of descent through thousands of years of human movements and cultural change has been difficult, if not impossible. Reburial after scientific study is a compromise most archaeologists seem willing to make, albeit reluctantly. Many Native Americans, however, remain opposed to further study, believing it is disrespectful, regardless of affiliation. In the case of the scientific analysis of ancient Nevadans presented in this issue of the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, we offer these studies in sincere respect, recognizing the unique identity and history of departed persons and hoping to learn from them.

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