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World Archaeology, Vol. 4, No. 2, Nomads. (Oct., 1972), pp. 167-178.

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The hunter-gatherer nomads of northern Mexico: a comparison of the archival and archaeological records

Walter W. Taylor

Nomads and the archaeological record

Since the theme of this issue of *World Archaeology* is that of 'Nomads', I believe it important to make clear at the outset that the concept *nomadism* is not unitary but indicative of several distinguishable and meaningful cultural categories. The hunter-gatherers of north-eastern Mexico, judging from either archaeological or archival sources, were fully migratory, without permanent settlements, and therefore, most certainly within any reasonable definition of 'nomads'. Nevertheless, they can hardly be compared, in terms of overall cultural style, with such other nomadic peoples as the pastoralists of Asia and Africa or the mounted hunters of the Great Plains of North America. Thus, it becomes obvious that nomadism, as far as cross-cultural comparison of life styles is concerned, is a criterion of secondary categorization. Some hunter-gatherers are nomadic and others are sedentary; some fishermen, pastoralists, and even a few agri-culturalists are nomadic, while many others are sedentary (Murdock 1967).

On the other hand, we must recognize that there are indeed certain cultural traits which are characteristic of all nomadic cultures and which strongly influence the course of any archaeological investigation upon them. In the first place, while nomads often do construct or utilize shelter, these dwellings are of a kind that can be moved or abandoned with ease and impunity. Thus, for the most part, the vestiges of nomadic peoples are scanty, diffuse, and offer very little to the archaeologist in the way of stratified deposits except rarely, and then only after repeated occupation of a single location over a very long span of time. But even where certain sites have been used and reused over many years, even millennia, the deposits of any single occupation are apt to be relatively and absolutely thin and, for this and other reasons, highly susceptible to subsequent disturbance and consequently difficult for the archaeologist to excavate and interpret. Thus, the only places the archaeologist can expect practicable remains of nomadic peoples in suitable stratified sequence is where there has been a concentration of occupation in time and space and some restriction upon the dispersal of cultural residua . . . in north-east Mexico, this means caves and rock-shelters.

Other cultural traits, generally characteristic of nomads, have also had influence upon archaeological investigations. One set of these consists of the small size of social units and the limited inventory and quantity of cultural objects. Just as with the transient

nature of site-occupation mentioned above, these are conducive to the fact that the deposits left by any one nomadic occupation are thin and that only after many occupations does a site build an archaeologically productive stratigraphic sequence of remains, and then only when there is a definite and finite limit to the area of occupation and dispersal, i.e. some mechanism by which remains become stacked rather than scattered. In other words, for the vestiges of its occupation by nomads to be useful for archaeological purposes, a site must have been occupied over a long period of time and be of such a nature as to confine the cultural debris so that there is an appreciable component of upward growth. Once again, at least in Coahuila, such circumstances are provided only by caves and rock-shelters.

Finally, it is further characteristic of nomads to prefer relatively lightweight, small, unbreakable, and easily portable tools, utensils, and other cultural contrivances. For one very important thing, this means that pottery is of rare occurrence among them, and the archaeologist of nomadic culture is usually denied those invaluable potsherds which, for other cultures, have supported his investigations so widely and so well. Thus, as with the other nomadic characteristics, such objects tend to the formation of thin and vulnerable deposits built of successive layers of natural and cultural deposits containing a high percentage of perishable ('lightweight') materials. And so once again, the archaeologist's work is coerced by the facts of nomadic life, and he is led to the excavation of caves and rock-shelters as potentially his most productive loci of information.

Therefore, in my archaeological surveys of Coahuila (e.g. Taylor 1937; Taylor and Rul 1960), I have concentrated, to the virtual exclusion of all else, upon finding sheltered sites, not primarily for the purpose of obtaining perishable materials but on the assumption that only in such places would I find productive concentrations of cultural debris of any sort. When open sites were stumbled upon in the course of this work (and this happened only rarely), they were of course recorded. But it is probable to a certainty that the sites of many such ephemeral occupations were missed during fieldwork. The practicalities of a rather austere and deterministic field situation dictated a concentration upon the potentially most productive sites, and the point of diminishing returns would have soon been reached had we run the arroyos or tramped the alluvial fans looking for the meagre traces of transient camp sites.

Thus I recognize the probability that our archaeological sample of ancient Coahuila culture is biased and that, if we had been able to base our analyses upon materials from open as well as from sheltered sites, our picture of ancient life in the area *might* have been different. But I do not believe that this is so . . . or at least significantly so. There is little chance, if our present view of aboriginal Coahuila culture is correct, that the Indians could have had two distinct inventories of material objects or would have behaved in a significantly different manner when occupying open as compared to sheltered sites. It is dubious that people with such a simple, meagre culture would possess more than one cultural phrasing or would have site-specific cultural sub-varieties distinct enough in their material remains to invalidate inferences and syntheses based on findings at only one type of site. This, I realize, is in opposition to some views expressed by Lewis and Sally Binford (1966) and François Bordes (1961) with regard to Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer cultures, which are in some pertinent ways quite comparable to those of Coahuila. But a careful reading of the archives and a recognition of the remarkable

cultural conservatism of Coahuila cultures through time (Taylor 1966: 61f.) would appear to support my view, at least in so far as north-eastern Mexico is concerned, that these nomads carried with them, wherever they moved and wherever they stopped, some variant of a single, basic culture and one which, therefore, is most efficiently studied where it is the best represented . . . within the confines of sheltered sites.

Coahuila and north-east Mexico

With this preamble, let us now look at the culture of Coahuila hunter-gatherers as representative not only of the nomadic cultures of north-east Mexico but of nomadic culture as a generic concept. I shall do this by taking departure from the archival sources and appose to them the data from our archaeological excavations and analyses. This exercise will have the double purpose of more fully presenting some of the cultural details of the prehistoric peoples of a large section of north-eastern Mexico, and also of showing the remarkable concordance of two, independent bodies of data deriving from an exceptionally long but also exceptionally homogeneous cultural continuum (Taylor 1961: 73; 1956: 231).

Documentary sources

But a word of caution and explanation is first in order. The Spanish archives covering the first entradas and early evangelical/colonizing activities in northern Mexico are relatively abundant, but unfortunately those which treat specifically of the north-eastern sector and particularly of what is now Coahuila and Nuevo León are very few. Furthermore, as I have noted elsewhere (1966: 60), they 'are often coloured by religious and evangelical motives which reduce their coverage and throw suspicion upon their objectivity and truth'. In the following, then, I shall be using in the main only two sources: *Historia de Nuevo León* by Alonso de León (1649), a primary source, and *La Comarca Lagunera* by Pablo Martínez del Rio (1954), a secondary source which is a compendium of data from the known major archives pertaining to the earliest Spanish/Indian contacts (from about the fourth quarter of the sixteenth to the third quarter of the seventeenth century) in the so-called Laguna (Lake) District of south-western Coahuila. Neither of these sources concerns itself specifically with the area of our excavations but, as will be seen, the culture which they describe is remarkably similar to that which we have found in central Coahuila, and our present opinion is that, throughout the entire region comprising the present states of Coahuila and Nuevo León, we are dealing with what is essentially a single culture and its 'microvariations'. In the following account, then, I shall not be consistent in giving citations for individual statements: unless another source is given, all references are to be understood as coming from the above-mentioned two publications. Furthermore, I shall mention here only those cultural traits for which there is evidence in both the archival and the archaeological records. Since a full treatment of all the data from each would be both impossible and improper here, this provides a logical and manageable compromise and one which, although not complete, will still give a reasonably viable and sensitive picture of the culture.

Archaeological sources

Second in order is a word about our archaeological data. These derive, in the vast majority, from three sheltered sites, Frightful Cave (CM-68), Fat Burro Cave (CM-24), and Nopal Shelter (CM-28), all located in the canyons that ring the Cuatro Ciénegas basin in central Coahuila. An early run of eleven C¹⁴ dates revealed for Frightful Cave, the largest and most important of these sites, a chronological range from approximately 7500 B.C. to A.D. 185 (Crane 1956). Within this unexpectedly long time-range (Taylor 1956: 215-18), several 'complexes' which are chronologically and to some extent culturally separable have been identified (Taylor 1966: 60ff.). These are not to be thought of as 'cultures' or as representing socio-political or linguistic groups: in the present state of our understanding, the culture complexes of Coahuila are merely variations upon a single cultural tradition. However, it should be stated that we are still in the process of studying the archaeological material, and it is possible that at least some of our present ideas will change . . . although it is doubtful that any such change will be drastic or be more than a modification of our basic beliefs today.

Physical attributes

The archives tell us that physically the Indians of Coahuila were of good stature, of light build, comely and graceful, and in general better featured than others whom the Jesuit padres had met previously. On the other hand, Mota Padilla (1742) says that they were of 'corpulent and robust stature'. Our osteological collections from Coahuila are meagre and are only now being studied, but first impressions indicate that they represent a gracile population, some with dolichocephalic to hyper-dolichocephalic skulls, reminiscent of the Pericue-Lagoa Santa type (Taylor 1966: 85ff.). Cultural evidence in the form of a multitude of sticks, some of them of quite large diameters, which have been severed by twisting, and the total absence of any chopping tools that might have been used to cut the great amount of wood encountered in the sites shows that the Indians were accustomed to manhandle quantities of tough, desert-grown wood of considerable size and suggests that the people were probably more than commonly strong.

Clothing, adornment, personal habits

Males are said to have gone nude, their bodies and faces painted, with a (deer?) skin or rabbit-skin robe over the shoulder, and sandals with leather straps. The women also went nude except for some grass or twisted herbage over the genitals and/or a pair of deer-skin aprons, long in back and short in front; they were painted and wore robes like the men. Hair was worn long and flowing loose but was sometimes tied with deer-skin strips into a rope hanging to the buttocks. The men plucked the hair of the forehead leaving a bald zone. From the excavated sites, we have recovered much raw (and some prepared?) hematite and a few stone paint palettes or grinding slabs, which could have been used for body paint as well as for the paint they used on matting and for parietal art. Strips and rather amorphous pieces of deer skin have been found, but none in a form to suggest original use. Twisted strands of rabbit skin have also been found with

evidence of having been either plaited or twined into larger fabrics. In addition, larger fragments of twined fibre robes are not uncommon, and one was found *in situ* around the back and shoulders of an aged female burial. From Frightful Cave alone we recovered over 950 fibre sandals having fibre ties of several kinds; only one sandal of leather has been found, and it also had ties of fibre. One complete twined fibre apron with its leather waist tie still caked with what appears to be human grease and dust came from the same site along with other fragments which could have been from either robes or aprons.

The archives mention adornments of feathers, bones, and sticks put in holes in the nose, ears, and lips, also strings of beads made from hard fruits, (wild) beans, shells, and animal teeth. Scarification was practised with a fish mouth or vegetal spines to produce blood during the Peyote and Comet ceremonials, also in early childhood with sharp flints and charcoal, evidently, to produce a cicatrix. Objects of ornamentation from our archaeological contexts are rare. There are tubular beads of bone and marine(!) shell, more or less round beads of seeds, stone, and marine shell, a string of very small artiodactyl hoof covers, and a single antelope hoof pierced and with a thong (for suspension?). There are three pendants of stone, one polished, one scratched with a design, and all pierced. There are two shell pendants, one shell and one painted stone button-like object also pierced. There are several wrapped feathers which could have been used as the archives describe. Scarifiers and/or tattooers, however, are present in some diversity: *Agave lechuguilla* spines turned back and through themselves with wrappings, several *Opuntia* spines made into a needle-sharp 'comb' (the archives actually use the word *comb* to describe a blood-letting instrument) by twining with fine fibre, and a series of sharp rodent teeth stuck through and wrapped into a small twig.

The archives say that the Indians' encampments were filthy, with a horrible stench, that they never washed their hands and bathed only for refreshment, not cleanliness. In our excavations, we found that human faeces were everywhere throughout the sites, not only against the walls but in the middle of the occupation area and often incorporated into, or stuck fast to, the surface of the living floors. Articles which were used in the hand and other objects which came in contact with the human body, e.g. knife handles and atlatls, robes, aprons, and waist ties, were found very often to be strongly stained and caked with dust and grime in a medium of what could very well be, and probably is, human grease.

Habitations

Alonso de León says that the natives of Nuevo León had settlements of up to fifteen bell-shaped grass or cane huts arranged in lines or in a semi-circle, with low doorways and a fire in the centre, and that the people slept on a deer skin on the floor with grass under their heads. But these appear to have been exceptional and brought together mostly in times of war; for the rest they wandered in groups of one to a few families within limits set by agreement with neighbouring groups. Other chroniclers, speaking specifically of south-western Coahuila at the time of the earliest entradas, say that the Indians had no houses nor any fixed abode. To date, we have found no evidence for houses of any sort, but in the two earliest levels of Frightful Cave (and nowhere else) we found

occupation floors which had been purposefully prepared by bringing in earth that was then consolidated by water and probably tamped. These floors were quite thin but evidently served the purpose of making a relatively smooth surface by covering, i.e. being laid over, cave spalls, fall rocks, piles of fibre, and other rough or protuberant places. Fireplaces appear to have been randomly distributed.

Subsistence

There can be no doubt, on reading the archives, that the native subsistence was gained largely, probably entirely, from hunting and gathering. However, Martínez del Rio seems to entertain the possibility of pre-Spanish agriculture in the Laguna District on the basis of certain archival references (1954: 69ff.). These references appear to me to be ambiguous at best, and none can be said to state definitely that the agriculture reported existed before the coming of Europeans into the region in the 1570s or thereabouts. I believe that the problem may lie in the fact that Ralph Beals, whose attribution of agriculture to the Laguneros (1932: 99, 157, 159) raised the question in the first place, evidently confused his references. In fact, Beals attributes agriculture to the Laguneros on the basis of a document which says just the opposite: '. . . but those (natives) of the lake (Laguna District), half fish, half men, live partly in the water and partly on land; but nowhere do they have (permanent) habitations, nor do they plant or gather other than what the land offers voluntarily. . . .' (*Documentos* 1857: 22, from the *Anua* for 1596). What Beals may have used as (erroneous) evidence is the immediately preceding sentence from the same volume, which, however, refers to the maize agriculture of the Tepehuan Indians, not that of the Laguneros; or he may have used a reference to the post-Spanish situation obtaining at the mission of Parras, in the Laguna District, as stated in a later *Anua*, that of 1598, which is published in the same source but on a later page (*Documentos* 1857: 49-50). There is no reason to believe that the native subsistence, as reported in these later sources (among them the well-known letter of 1601 of padre Arnaya in *Documentos* 1857: 69), had not been altered from that of aboriginal times by influences from the Spanish and/or their imported 'tame' Indians of conquered agricultural tribes, particularly in view of the fact that no archaeological evidence from the region has produced unassailable indication of the practice of agriculture. I am aware, of course, of the unique examples of obviously domesticated bottle gourds recovered from the burial caves of the Laguna District (Aveleyra *et al.* 1956: 190ff.; Taylor 1968: 26, fig. 5); these are certainly late in the Coahuila cultural sequence and may be proto-historic or even historic. There is also the strong probability, in view of the 'advanced' and seemingly non-local attribute of cloisonné decoration which has been applied to them, that these artefacts are imports from outside the region, possibly from the Chalchihuites culture not a very great distance up the drainage of the Aguanaval river which flows into the Laguna District from the south . . . although the dates from cloisonné ceramic decoration there are extremely early (late Classic, c. A.D. 300-500 according to Kelley and Kelley 1971: 162) and any direct relationship thus rather dubious.

We are told that the Indians ate all birds and 'animals', including rabbits, ground squirrels or gophers (*tusas*), mice, even venomous snakes but excepting toads and lizards. Deer meat is stated to have been the best they had. There are records of the

use of bison in central and north-eastern Coahuila and in Nuevo León. The lakes of the Laguna District provided quantities of aquatic birds and fish, and the rivers flowing into them were full of many kinds of fish which they ate. No mention is made of the dog, either as food or in any other context, and archaeological excavation has turned up no bones that can certainly be identified as dog. The archaeological sites have produced a great number of other mammal bones of many kinds (Gilmore 1947). Deer, rabbits, and a variety of small rodents are the most common (concurring with the archives), but also included are porcupine, grizzly bear, bison, and elk, no longer native to the region; significantly there is no evidence of the use of fish for food although the Rio Nadadores and the Rio Monclova, which flow relatively near our sites, contained edible fish at the time of the early Spanish entradas (Alessio Robles 1938: 250). Remains of birds are scarce; aquatic species, present today and undoubtedly in the past in the marshes and pools of the Cuatro Ciénegas basin, have not been found, and it must be inferred that they were not used.

Probably the largest proportion of the subsistence economy pertained to the gathering of vegetal foods. The archives tell us that summers were spent collecting fruits, particularly the nopal (*Opuntia*, the prickly-pear, whose fruits are called *tuna*) and mesquite (*Prosopis*), whose pods and beans they ate fresh when just ripe and ground into flour for 'bread' when dry in the fall and winter. We found *Opuntia* seeds, desiccated fruit, and 'pads' as well as the pods and beans of mesquite throughout the archaeological deposits, and there were several caches of the latter contained in plaited-matting bags in Frightful Cave. Flour from other 'seeds' was also made into cakes (*panes*), and in the caves we found multitudes of seeds which presumably could have been used for this purpose: hackberry (*Celtis*), legumes (*Acacia*, *Mimosa*), nuts (*Juglans*, *Pinus cembroides*). During the winter they also used various roots (of aquatic plants in the Laguna District) which they ground into flour to make twists or rings (*roscas*) of bread; we found no evidence of edible roots in any of our sites. The heads of *Agave* (the maguey, mescal, or century-plant) were roasted to release the sweet, molasses-like juice in the fleshy leaves which were then chewed, sucked, and thrown away 'on top of where they walked and slept', later when they were hungry to be gathered up, dried, ground in a mortar, and eaten. These discarded, sucked-out fibrous wads are the so-called 'quids' which were everywhere in the occupation sites and of which we counted and typed over 22,000 from Frightful Cave alone!

Tools, utensils, and other manufactures

In addition to objects of manufacture already mentioned, there are a number of others which are referred to in the archives. The Indians were said to be very adept with the bow which they preferred to make of mesquite root and on which they used a bow-string of twisted *Agave lechuguilla* fibre. We have found numerous more or less fragmentary arrows but no direct evidence of the bow, but the burial caves of the Laguna District have produced bows with fibre bow-strings (Aveleyra *et al.* 1956: 128ff.). Alonso de León says that their arrows were of fire-cured cane [possible? – or confused with fire-cured hardwood foreshafts such as we have found?], notched for the bow-string, and fletched with two or three feathers 'from more or less four fingers to a palm in length'

(about two and one-half to eight inches) fastened with either a 'bitumen-like' substance or with deer sinew; at the distal end, there was a 'toasted stick' which was set 'four fingers' into the cane up to a joint bound with sinew and was notched to hold a flint point of lance-point or anchor shape. In Fat Burro Cave, proximal ends of two wooden arrow shafts with bow-string nocks were found in an infant burial of Mayran Complex affiliations, i.e. late; each has two feathers which, on one specimen, are approximately 12 cm. ($4\frac{2}{3}$ inches) long and on the other somewhat shorter, both fastened with sinew. Still another arrow shaft, this time of cane, also late from the Top level of the same site, has three feathers 17 cm. long (about $6\frac{2}{3}$ inches) fastened with gum-like ('bitumen?') adhesive. Arrow parts have been found in five other sites (but not in Frightful Cave, whose occupation was probably too early): cane shafts with (self-pointed) foreshafts in them, shafts alone, shafts or foreshafts notched for points. Uncertainty as to what, precisely, is meant by 'lance-point' or 'anchor' shape prevents comparison with the multitude of small projectile points from Coahuila, some with sinew still wrapped around them, many of which could be called lance-point or anchor shaped. Mention is made of a narrow, two-edged flint knife or dagger, two fingers wide and a palm long (about one and one-quarter by eight inches) secured with 'bitumen' into a handle and used as an axe [*sic*]; large, handled 'knives', but of considerably greater width, are found in Mayran Complex (late) sites in the Laguna District and as components of the Coastal Plain Complex (late) in eastern Coahuila and Nuevo León (Taylor 1966: 83-5; Aveleyra *et al.* 1956: 84ff.).

Alonso de León describes an arched stick 'shaped like a Japanese sword', which served them as a cane or staff in walking, a pillow for sleeping, and a 'hoe or bar for their needs'; this reference is surely to the so-called 'grooved clubs' or 'rabbit sticks' (Heizer 1942) which have been found in the Southwest and in northern Mexico and of which we recovered twenty-four fragmentary specimens. Wooden mortars are mentioned, but the only mortars we found are not wooden, being located in large boulders or in bed-rock; a portable stone mortar is known from the Laguna District (Barragán *et al.* 1960: fig. 31). Fire is said to have been made by rubbing sticks together; we found many sticks with ember notches and holes drilled in the process of making fire, some undoubted fire-drills, and a few sticks which could have been used to make fire by rubbing, although the latter identification is tenuous because the charring of sticks could have resulted merely from being laid in or near a fire, a smouldering coal, or a red-hot fire rock. Gourd rattles are reported by Alonso de León; no such artefacts have been found archaeologically but gourd vessels are known (see p. 172 above). Musical rasps are also mentioned, and in Frightful Cave we found two artefacts which, on the basis of form, we unhesitatingly identify as such.

Various forms of textiles are chronicled and have counterparts in our archaeological collections. Alonso de León notes that their net carrying-frames 'they carry on the back from the forehead', suggesting a tumpline; strips of plaited fibre which we identify as tumplines are not uncommon in the archaeological materials. Small 'sacks' of matting were used to store flour; we have found several bags of plaited matting containing caches of beans and pods of mesquite and of the narcotic seed *monilla* (*Ungnadia speciosa*). In addition, whole mats and pieces of plaited matting are very common throughout the sites. Baskets are said (*Documentos* 1857: 15) to have been used in the region of the Bolsón

de Mapimí, north of the Laguna District, and our collections contain large numbers of whole and fragmentary coiled baskets. The Indians inhabiting the lake shores of the Laguna District and the in-flowing Rio Nasas used basketry traps (*nasas*) and nets to catch fish; mention is also made of nets used with 'arched sticks' for carrying. Netting, both knotted and knotless, is very common in the archaeological sites, and we have found quite a number of fragmentary arched sticks, many tied together as for a frame and one nearly complete carrying-frame of the same construction with its net still in place. Robes and 'coverlets' were made of twisted strips of rabbit skin; lengths of such skin, often wrapped around twisted fibre cordage, were not uncommon in Frightful Cave, although no single piece large enough to be called a 'textile' was recovered. One authority says that in the Laguna District the women dressed in skins which were decorated with 'fringes and borders'; one artefact, identified as a fringe and made of sinew, was found in Fat Burro Cave, and another six made of fibre with either feathers or fur dangling from the strands came from Frightful Cave. Alonso de León says that water was carried 'in hollow prickly pear' [pads] and that flour was stored in similar containers; a number of these pads, split open and with the 'open edge' sewn together again to make a passable container, came from Frightful Cave. Twisted cordage is mentioned in connection with the woman's loin cloth and the bow-string which is specifically stated to have been made of *Agave lechuguilla* fibre; twisted cordage, mostly of *Agave lechuguilla*, is the most common manufactured artefacts from the Coahuila caves, no less than 1,195 pieces coming from Frightful Cave alone.

Religion, ceremonial practices

Several archives mention that peyote (*Lophophora Williamsi*) was drunk at feasts and dances and that wine (*vino*) was made from *Agave*. These statements suggest that narcosis and intoxication were customary. We note that from one Mayran Complex (late) burial cave in west-central Coahuila there is a series of peyote buttons strung on a string, that from Frightful Cave there are several bags full of seeds of the Texas buckeye (*Ungnadia speciosa*), which are narcotic in small doses, fatal in large amounts, and that throughout the site we found quantities of the so-called 'mescal bean' (*Sophora secundiflora*), a well-known narcotic (Campbell 1958). Deer ceremonialism is reported for the Laguna District, where 'the heads with their horns' of deer killed by ancestors are kept and used in mourning ceremonies and in rites to secure health and success in hunting. In site CM-74, a looted burial cave near Frightful Cave, there was the crown of a deer skull with the mandibles crossed and tied into the horns. Cannibalism is said to have been a ritual practice (and evidently one purely of sustenance in some instances); the custom was to roast the flesh and to mix the ground bones in the peyote drink; at certain settlements, gnawed human bones were found rolled in a mat and showing evidence of having been roasted; the Indians 'always' kept the upper part of the skull to eat and drink from: at one ranchería Alonso de León encountered twenty or thirty of these. We have found no skull cups, but this rather offhand, non-ritualized treatment of human remains is in accord with what we have found to be the case in our Coahuila explorations: individual human bones, often burned, have been discovered isolated and at random through the deposits; formal burials are scarce (see discussion below), and many of

those that we have found were without skulls; there is much use of plaited matting to wrap what appear to be secondary burials, or at least dry, disarticulated, and sometimes burned bones.

Death, burial

For Nuevo León, Alonso de León tells us that those dead which the Indians were not going to eat were interred in the open, either planting prickly pear over the spot or making a fence to keep animals away; they also burned some and buried the ashes. We have found no indications of any of these practices. However, for the Laguna District, there is mention of burial 'concavities' and 'caves' in deep canyons, where many skulls and bones were found covered with rocks and the canyon walls 'marked with letters or characters made of blood'. It is in precisely such places and under such conditions (in small niches, under piles of rock, and often with red pictographs in the vicinity) that we have found all but two of our human burials; and it is certain that, if we had made more effort to locate such burial sites, we could have done so almost at will . . . anytime we did make such an effort, we found the burials. Furthermore, in the Laguna District, quantities of burial bundles have been found in large mortuary caves or caverns (Aveleyra *et al.* 1956; Barragán *et al.* 1960; Taylor 1968). Alonso de León says that for mourning the women pulled out their front hair and cut the rest; in Frightful Cave, some of our most curious and provocative finds were the balls of human hair which were found only in the Bottom level and most often tucked beneath the large fall-rocks which were present on the floor of the cave at the time of first occupancy; the hair had not been plucked but had been cut at regular intervals of about one month (since both ends showed cutting and the hairs were only about one to two inches in length). Whether or not we have here the record of mourning practices, it seems certain that we are dealing with the ritual handling of human hair for some purpose or other. The archives tell us that in the Bolsón de Mapimí, immediately north of the Laguna District, the hair of young girls was cut off and used to sprinkle blood from scarifications during the Comet ceremonial, also suggesting a ritual use of human hair. Finally, Alegre (1767: 417-18) describes the ceremonial burning of a deer skull during a burial rite in the Laguna District, which recalls what has already been said above (p. 175) concerning deer ceremonialism in connection with the burial site, CM-74.

Despite this staccato and somewhat disjointed presentation, I trust that the data which I have been able to bring together have served to emphasize what is crystal clear from the data themselves: that the archives of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the available archaeological data deriving from as long ago as 7500 B.C. are in remarkable agreement and can be considered to represent a single cultural continuum of surprising age and notable conservatism. For this and other reasons, including richness of the archaeological remains themselves, we have in north-eastern Mexico, especially in Coahuila, a most fertile field for the pursuit of anthropological archaeology or of archaeological anthropology – depending on one's point of view.

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Abstract

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The hunter-gatherer nomads of northern Mexico: a comparison of the archival and archaeological records

Certain characteristics of the culture(s) of nomads are discussed and to these are attributed the concentration of archaeological work in north-eastern Mexico upon excavation of sheltered sites.

By presenting and comparing cultural traits for which there is evidence from both the early archival sources and the archaeological record, a reasonably viable and sensitive picture of aboriginal culture in north-eastern Mexico is given. These data serve to emphasize the long duration and the remarkable similarity and conservatism of nomad culture in the area over a period of some 9,000 years, from about 7500 B.C. to the time of the Spanish entradas in the early seventeenth century.