

ARTIFACTS AND FEATURES UNPROVENANCED ARTIFACTS

This article is one of an occasional series discussing matters archaeological, especially with reference to the Maturango Museum. Topics discussed in previous articles have been relatively uncontroversial, but this one deals with a topic on which opinions may differ: research value and publication of unprovenanced artifacts. Basically, “unprovenanced” refers to artifacts whose source or point of origin is uncertain, and is frequently a euphemism for looted artifacts.

Concern over the scale and scope of the illicit antiquities trade has grown over the course of recent years, and has led governments and archaeological societies to take steps to discourage the looting of artifacts. One of these steps is discouraging or prohibiting the use of “unprovenanced” collections in research or publication, the idea being that publishing articles about looted artifacts will increase their market value.

In my view, these steps are well-intentioned but have unintended consequences which are counter-productive. Collections with limited or poor provenance information may still provide valuable data for research, depending on the nature of the research questions. Furthermore, I seriously doubt whether withholding publication will degrade the sales value of artifacts very much.

Collections held by a museum typically a “mixed bag”, ranging from artifacts donated by community members to professionally excavated collections, and the Maturango Museum is no exception. This variety is reflected in the accuracy with which point of origin is known; generally, items donated from casual or avocational collections have limited to poor information associated with them. Furthermore, standards expected of professional excavations have evolved over the years, so older professional collections often have poor provenance data by modern standards. Despite the best good-faith efforts of a museum to ascertain the source of collections, it is often not possible to do so rigorously.

Despite these limitations, unprovenanced collections in museums can provide valuable resources for research, a case in point being the Little Lake Biface Cache at the Maturango Museum. In about 1963 a collection of 27 large obsidian bifaces was donated to the Maturango Museum. The origin of the collection is unclear, and there are at least two different stories of the source. The location was noted only as the “Little Lake area”, and since the principals are now deceased, it is unlikely we will ever know more. The collection bears a 1963 accession number.

The cache reposed (or languished) in the Museum collections storage until 2001, when Ms. Elva Younkin, the Museum Archaeology Curator at the time, brought them to the attention of an archaeologist, Dr. Alan Gold, who recognized them as possibly associated with the prehistoric obsidian trade and undertook an analysis. The obsidian was sourced to the Sugarloaf area of the Coso volcanic field, adjacent to Little Lake, but the age was a big surprise. Generally such trade bifaces are very old, and the trade is usually viewed as having ceased around 700 B.P. Obsidian hydration measurements on the Little Lake Cache, however, suggested the relatively late age of approximately 650 B.P, and Dr. Gold and his colleagues concluded

“...The cache would lend some limited support to the continued use of large biface cores as a means of production and transport of portable units of tool stone significantly later than might be expected and in a volume/mass that is surprising”.

This case demonstrates the research value of a small collection with poor provenance information. In this case the biggest issue was knowing the collection existed at all, since it sat in storage for nearly 40 years before coming to the attention of a scholar. This collection would have been valuable even with no provenance information at all, since the mere existence of such recent trade biface cores fabricated of Coso obsidian was unexpected. The provenance was adequate for the research questions asked, and the cache provided unexpected data on the duration of the prehistoric trans-Sierran obsidian trade.

Of course, the foregoing discussion applies to existing museum collections. Nobody would advocate that it is acceptable to perform a new excavation to poor standards. Since archaeological sites are non-renewable resources, any dig should be performed to the best standards practicable.

Clearly nobody wants to encourage the antiquities trade, but the way to stop it is better policing of sales. The collections policy of the Maturango Museum specifically states:

“Artifacts, specimens and art shall be acquired and/or curated only when the Maturango Museum has determined to the best of its ability that they have been collected, exported, and imported in full compliance with the laws and regulations of the country or countries of origin, of the federal government of the United States, and of individual states within the United States. The Maturango Museum shall not acquire or curate archaeological or ethnographic material, specimens or art objects which it has reason to believe have been unethically collected or unethically alienated from their society of origin. The Maturango Museum will abide by all laws relating to repatriation of ethnographic and archaeological materials.

In my view, declining to publish “unprovenanced” collections or artifacts is a short-sighted policy. It will not decrease their market value appreciably or slow the antiquities trade, but it will deny data to scholars.