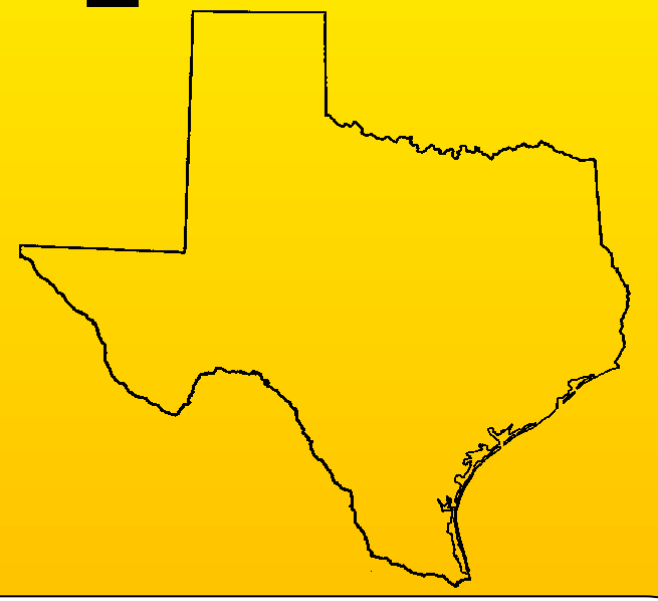


Relations between South Texas Hunter-gatherers and Complex Mesoamerican Societies



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*All photos courtesy of the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory, Austin, Texas, unless otherwise specified

Introduction

The hunter-gatherers that occupied the deep-south Texas coast from the Archaic to Late Prehistoric periods are not well known. One particular group of hunter-gatherers, known as the Brownsville Complex, or Brownsville-Barril Complex, is the focus of this poster due to two distinct features:

1. An intense shell industry which included a surplus amount of shell ornaments and tools.
2. The use of Huastecan Tancol Polychrome pottery, jadeite objects and green obsidian from Mexico (Terneny 2005; Fagan 2005).

The Brownsville Complex is believed to have occupied modern day Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy counties in south Texas and the most northern parts of Mexico. They were hunter-gatherers and fishers that occupied clay dunes and buried their dead in cemeteries. Most of what we know about the Brownsville Complex comes from these cemetery sites (Hester 1994). Not only do we find Huastecan artifacts in Brownsville Complex cemeteries and occupation sites, Brownsville Complex shell ornaments have also been found further inland in south Texas and as far as Huastecan sites along the Mexican Gulf coast (MacNeish 1947). This may be evidence for increasing social complexity of south Texas hunter-gatherers during the Middle and Late Archaic but it also creates some interesting questions concerning the relations between south Texas hunter-gatherers and the more complex societies that were located significant distances from them (200-300 miles).

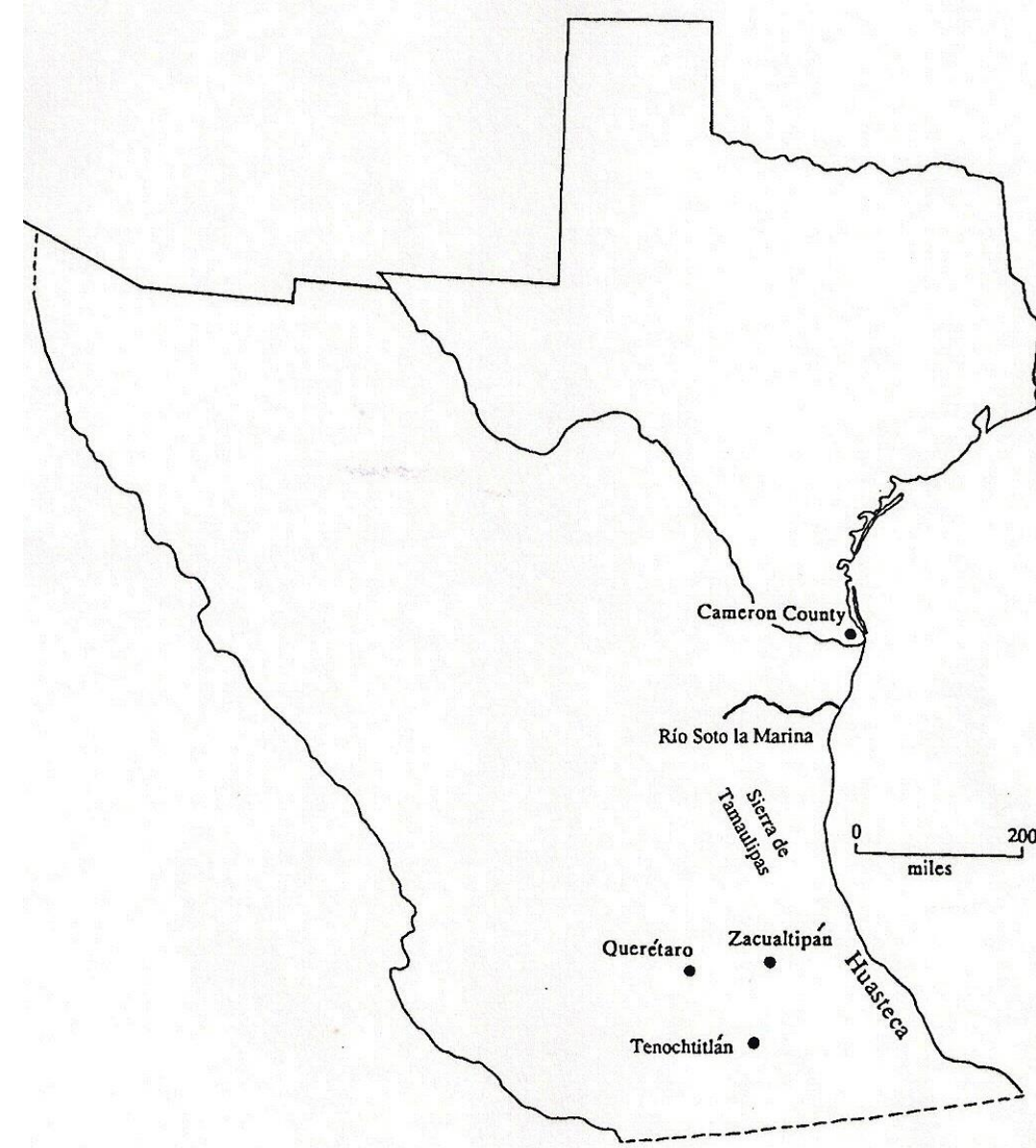


Figure 1. Map of area discussed with Cameron County and Huasteca area (from Hester 1994, fig. 2).

Research

Interest in the south Texas area began around the 1930s when civil engineer and Brownsville resident, Andrew Eliot Anderson, collected over 2,000 artifacts from 196 sites in Cameron and Willacy Counties between 1908 and 1940 (Terneny 2005, MacNeish 1947). During the mid 1940s, Richard S. MacNeish conducted an archaeological survey in portions of Sierra de Tamaulipas, coastal Tamaulipas, and nearby portions of Texas based on A.E. Anderson's work (Solis 2009). His purpose was to find cultural relations between "people of the Southeast and the more complex cultures of Mexico" (MacNeish 1947:1). Unfortunately, many of the sites visited by A.E. Anderson were destroyed due to urban development before more modern archaeological methods could be performed at the sites.



Figure 2: Water jar from a site in Cameron County found by A.E. Anderson. Local ceramics were not made until the early prehistoric and this specimen is representative of Huastecan Period VI ceramics, 1000-1520 A.D. (Willey 1966 cited in Hester 1994).



Figure 3: Valero Red Painted olla from Tanque Salado Site, Tamaulipas Mexico. This olla was discovered by A.E. Anderson after it had been eroded out by 1933 hurricanes (Hester 1994). The motifs are similar to those in figure 2.

Excavations in the south Texas area continued from the 1940s to this day. Most specimens collected from these excavations are housed at the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory in Austin, Texas or the Center for Archaeological Research in San Antonio, Texas. Collections from both these laboratories have been studied by the author along with professional literature from both sides of the Rio Grande Delta and early ethnohistoric accounts.

Results

Analysis of literature from both south Texas and Tamaulipas, Mexico leave many questions unanswered. If trade between the south Texas hunter-gatherers and the complex societies of Mexico was occurring, how and why this trade happened is still unknown. There are several possibilities including, but not limited to:

1. Direct trade between the Huasteca and the Brownsville Complex. The Huasteca were drawn north to the Rio Grande Delta specifically for Brownsville Complex marine shell ornaments (Hester 1994). The Huasteca traded obsidian, jadeite, and ceramics for these shell ornaments.
2. Indirect trade occurring between the Brownsville Complex, the peoples of Sierra de Tamaulipas, and the Huasteca.
3. Rather than being a distinct cultural group, the Brownsville Complex were part of the Sierra de Tamaulipas groups continuing southward toward Huasteca territory. They obtained Huastecan goods through everyday trade relations rather than trade events.
4. The Brownsville Complex descended from Huasteca, breaking off from Huastecan groups and continuing 200-300 miles north. Here they could have either settled, or perhaps had been sent to collect shell and produce shell goods to bring back to the Huastecan "homeland."

Figure 4: (right) Shell and bone pendants and beads from the A.E. Anderson collection, found in the Rio Grande Delta Area. Artifacts such as these are found on both sides of the modern day border.



Figure 5: (left) A pumice pipe from the A.E. Anderson collection, Cameron County. Stone pipes such as these are found throughout Texas. Pumice pipes are rare as pumice is not found in Texas and would have had to been imported from Mexico.

A comparison of the archaeological data and ethnohistoric data show a discontinuity between Brownsville Complex sites and the Coahuilteco and Carrizo groups that resided in south Texas during the Early Historic Period. Not only is there a discontinuity through time, but also through space as the Brownsville Complex is different from other south Texas hunter-gatherer groups by showing greater social complexity and by creating a visually drastic surplus amount of goods.

Questions for Future Research

The nature of the relations between south Texas hunter-gatherers and complex Mesoamerican societies is still unknown but with further research can provide insight into the complexity of social and economic relationships during the Archaic and Late Prehistoric periods. This spatial-temporal analysis can potentially serve as a model or analogy to aid in our understanding of prehistoric economies. The following questions and guides will be used by the author to direct future research:

1. Did the Huasteca give Brownsville Complex shell ornaments to the Aztec as part of required tribute as suggested by Hester (1994)? If so, to what extent was the Brownsville Complex involved in this economic relationship?
2. What do the discontinuities between the Brownsville Complex and Early Historic Period groups tell us about who the Brownsville people were and where they came from?
3. What function did Huastecan and other trade goods serve in Brownsville Complex society? What function did Brownsville Complex trade goods serve in Huastecan society?
4. More research should be conducted on Sierra de Tamaulipas peoples since the borders we place between these groups is a subjective matter.
5. As suggested by Terneny (2005:212), future research should also "concentrate on economic patterns and resource utilization with a focus on investigating the exploitation of environmental zones from which cultural features such as the shell industry arose."

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