Nineteenth-century Apache wickiups: historically documented models for archaeological signatures of the dwellings of mobile people

Deni J. Seymour*

Highly mobile people must have sheltered in structures of some kind; but these are notoriously difficult to find. The author uses nineteenth-century photographs of an occupied Apache settlement to show how such shelters may have been made, comparing them with their archaeological remains in the present day. This suggests a ‘signature’ for the temporary shelters used by mobile groups in any period.

Keywords: American Southwest, Palaeolithic, Apache, wickiup, shelter, settlement, mobile groups

Introduction

An important but challenging task of archaeology is the identification of ephemeral structures, especially those temporary shelters erected by highly mobile people. Since the first Late Palaeolithic structures were defined in the Châtelperronian Layers X-IX by André Leroi-Gourhan in the Grotte du Renne, France (Leroi-Gourhan & Leroi-Gourhan 1964) questions have arisen about their interpretation as cultural rather than natural features and their classification as houses rather than living surfaces (Gamble 1986; Kolen 1999). The identification of these shelters remains an important area of debate because of the implications of intentionally modified space and the ‘making of place’ by early humans, and for the origins of behavioural modernity (Zilhao 2006).

There are substantial differences in housing types between sedentary or semi-sedentary and highly mobile groups. Theoretical studies have examined the relationship between the character of structural remains and type and degree of mobility (Sahlins 1972: 33; McGuire & Schiffer 1983; Binford 1990; Diehl 1992; Smith 2003) – in general more mobile hunter-gatherers invest in less elaborate shelters (Upham 1994; Smith 2003: 163). Mobile people tend to build domed circular or semicircular rather than rectilinear houses (Robbins 1966; Whiting & Ayres 1968; Schiffer & McGuire 1983: 284; Binford 1990: 123; Diehl 1992). Houses reflecting high mobility also tend to be situated on the surface and have informal
superstructures made of unmodified, easily obtained local materials (Binford 1990: 123, 126; Smith 2003: 172).

Highly mobile groups are known to have resided in the American Southwest, but until recently there has been a general failure to identify evidence of their residential sites and housing features. Even seventeenth-century Europeans in western North America noted that the natives had ‘no houses, but only huts of branches’ (Ayer 1965: 13), illustrating the way in which mobile group structures are devalued. Consequently, there has been either a general expectation that no structures will be found or a focus on inapplicable material signatures. The result has been that mobile group residential sites and their hut remains have defied recognition. The structures are difficult to distinguish from natural clearings or rock alignments because they represent the barest modification to the ground surface. Referred to widely by the adjectives ‘enigmatic’, ‘subtle’, ‘unobtrusive’, and ‘ephemeral’ such features often go unnoticed. Yet, as Binford (1990: 121-2) has observed: ‘There are no known cases among modern hunter-gatherers where shelter is not fabricated in residential sites (anywhere that hunter-gatherers plan to sleep), regardless of the expected occupational duration, and only in rare instances are sites of any kind produced by hunter-gatherers where no shelter is provided by the occupants.’ For this reason shelters should not only be expected on mobile group residential sites but they should be widely distributed. Moreover, these types of structures are commonplace and a routinely accepted feature type in the far western deserts in America (Rogers 1939:8) where archaeologists have learned how to distinguish them.

One reason for the failure to identify the shelters is that researchers have relied on historical analogies that are too broad. Housing correlates in one area (such as tipis on the Great Plains) are inappropriately applied in another (the mountainous Southwest) where social, natural and historical conditions differ and where differing types of mobility prevailed. Although Apache hut signatures in the American Southwest are difficult to recognise, do not meet accepted standards of classifications for ‘dwellings’, and often fall below the detection threshold, hundreds have now been identified (e.g. Seymour 2002, 2004). One of the most efficient ways to identify the archaeological traces of these structures, and so to begin addressing how mobility affects construction, is to use historical examples with specific known contexts. In this paper I enlist the help of illustrations and descriptions of structures originally seen and photographed during Geronimo’s penultimate surrender at Cañon de los Embudos (Embudos), Sonora, Mexico, which occurred on 25-27 March 1886. The location of one of his last camps was photographically documented at the time by Camillus Sidney Fly (Figure 1). Modern researchers have matched the distinctive characteristics of the terrain shown in the photographs to locations on the ground (Hayes & Hayes 1991; Van Orden 1991), and in this way the location of the dated camp has been precisely identified. More importantly for our discussion, the structures in the encampment can be pinpointed and studied.

The structures

These photographically documented, historically described features correspond to three ‘types’ of archaeological features and to four ethnographic ‘types’. These features match the attributes typical of features previously referred to as ‘structural clearings’ or ‘sleeping
circles’, as well as ‘rock-ring huts’ and ‘modified boulder areas’, for example at the Cerro Rojo Site, a Peloncillo Mountain site, and the Cochise-Howard Treaty Site (Seymour 2002, 2004, 2008b; Seymour & Robertson 2008). The ‘structural clearings’ or ‘sleeping circles’ consist of flat clearings on an otherwise rocky surface, where rocks are pushed out to form the clearing, and may be slightly mounded or clustered around the perimeter. Except for this light human touch no other evidence of modification is apparent, other than perhaps artefacts and, rarely, an associated feature. Similarly subtle are the natural boulder outcrops that have been slightly modified by the movement of stones or supplemented with cobbles placed in intervening spaces forming ‘boulder-rimmed circles’ or ‘modified boulder areas’. ‘Rock-ringed hut’ circles are often the most ‘obvious’ with cobbles purposefully placed to form a structure outline (Figure 2).

A documentary source specific to the Embudos site provides further details: ‘We moved from one “jacal” to another, all being constructed alike of the stalks of the Spanish bayonet and mescal and amole, covered with shreds of blankets, canvas, and other textiles’ (Bourke 1980: 476). Close inspection of the images shows that these are not ‘jacals’ but rather are huts and that ocotillo branches were also incorporated into some of the wickiup frameworks at Embudos (Figures 1 and 3). Ocotillo, yucca and agave are also shown growing naturally and each is present today, but of these only ocotillo branches are sufficiently supple to bend, as shown in the framework of the wickiup in Figure 1. Some of the ocotillo branches so employed were still rooted and were simply bent over to form one side of the structure, alleviating the need for rock supports and accounting for breaks in rock alignments (Figure 3). In at least two instances the head and leaves of dried agaves and yuccas were used, along with blankets and other fabrics, to make the side walls. Some structures incorporated stiff robust yucca or agave stalks to form conical tipi-like constructions. In most instances, untrimmed poles and
branches were incorporated as found, as were other materials at hand. In the structure shown in Figure 1 the alignment of cobbles and boulders were leant upright against the ocotillo to hold blankets and ocotillo branch bases in place. Some of these rocks were dispersed when the blankets were removed and the house dismantled, thus rolling away from the feature boundaries.

From an ethnographic standpoint these structures are not all constructed alike, but instead show considerable variation, as is consistent with Diehl’s (1992) worldwide sample. All are curvilinear rather than rectilinear, consistent with expectations for highly mobile groups that have not been substantially influenced by modern technologies and materials (e.g. as have Alyawara structures; O’Connell 1987). In this single encampment, house forms include long elongated dome-shaped constructions, conical tipi-like constructions, small circular squat conical tents and pup-tent-like shelters (if including the scout camp).

Clearly, there were many different hut forms that archaeologists might be inclined to classify as different house types. The morphological variations (structural clearing, boulder-rimmed circles and rock-ringed hut outlines; Figure 2) visible at Embudos and the region in general were determined by the nature of the terrain itself and the prevailing conditions: season of use including weather and temperature, anticipated duration of stay, group identity or ethnicity, group size and function (Seymour 2002, 2008a, in press; see also O’Connell 1987). Rocky areas were sought to facilitate wickiup construction, provide additional shelter
from the elements, and camouflage the encampment. If a surface was especially rocky, an area would be cleared. If fewer rocks were present, rocks would be stacked or pushed together around the perimeter. Under warm conditions, a less substantial superstructure would be prepared, or in some cases no superstructure would be constructed (Polzer & Burrus 1971: 266, 273; Seymour 2002, 2004). In cold weather a more ample covering would be constructed if natural rockshelters were not used instead, and in windy conditions the walls were prepared more substantially to withstand gusts. Rocks might be placed on-end to lean against the branches, holding blankets (formerly hides) in place. When conditions changed, house form changed. Regardless of location and conditions, structures were improvised using immediately available materials, circumstances and settings, which explains why these features are most effectively identified in contradistinction to the nature of rocky surfaces in their surroundings. Boulder-rimmed sleeping circles and those without boulders are contemporaneous and, as Rogers (1966: 45) says the ‘construction and distribution of the two forms are governed entirely by the nature of the terrain upon which they are found. They appear on rocky land forms where coarse stones and even small boulders had to be removed from the surface in order to produce the circular clearings. These stones were then used to build the confining rims, or windbreaks.’ The wickiups at Embudos are represented today as rock-ring structures, boulder-rimmed circles and structural clearings. Rock-ring structures are a feature type that is more widely recognised for the Apache and other groups than are structural clearings and boulder-rimmed circles (Goodwin n.d.: 37; Pillis 1981; Donaldson & Welch 1991; Seymour 2002).

The similarity of these Embudos structural footprints today (Figure 2a-d) – nearly a century and a quarter after this historical event – to those encountered in mobile Apache and non-Apache sites throughout the southern Southwest many centuries old is striking.
Character of the settlement

Social and terrain-specific factors were influential in the layout of this residential site. Contemporaneous wickiups in the same encampment, including at Embudos, may be widely dispersed (several hundred metres apart), resisting archaeological boundary definitions. Several reasons for this can be contemplated, including safety in dispersal under conditions of impending attack, mother-in-law avoidance, separation for purification, or even rifts between occupants (Seymour 2002). At Embudos and on other Apache sites in this region, most wickiups are situated in or immediately adjacent to the rockiest areas showing the operative effects of terrain. A simple undifferentiated distributional pattern is represented at Embudos where structure location is determined by the terrain itself, rather than by other factors, such as food sharing (e.g. O'Connell 1987: 100-2, 105). Food preparation and consumption activities were most often situated apart from structures and there is no discernable spatial correspondence between hearth and hut. In some instances paired clearings are visible suggesting side-by-side huts or a wickiup and adjacent work area, as has been noted on a number of other ancestral Apache sites (Seymour 2002). In other cases, one wickiup is about twice the size of others, perhaps providing an alternative to preparation of two individual features. In still other instances a single wickiup is visible but many outdoor areas were used.

In environments with favourable weather many activities and temporary storage areas were positioned outside, around the structure, and in distant locations that provided suitable space for tasks, also accounting for the lack of hearths inside. Placement of wickiups among the rocks allowed enlistment of the maximal functionality of the location so that equipment could be scattered on the rocky surface and draped on rocks (as shown in Figure 3). The common absence of hearths in the shelters and the separation of work areas from them provide some indication of activity organisation. While shelters provided secluded space for sleeping, privacy, storage, corralling children, or protection from the elements, they do not seem to have contained the full range of household activities commonly associated with ‘dwellings’. Many of these same activities and others, like food preparation, were probably carried out in areas distant from the houses, in the shade, in areas designated for visitors, on flats adjacent to the hut, and in locations inherently suitable for the desired tasks.

Artefacts include flaked and ground stone and non-native materials (glass and metal) that were used and modified by the Apache. The association of artefacts is one of the most widely accepted criteria for designating a clearing or alignment as a cultural feature. Although artefacts are scattered lightly across the Embudos site, they are found in and near only some structures, indicating that this criterion for feature designation is far too limiting for mobile people who may select work areas that are many tens or hundreds of metres from their huts. Other indices are more reliable, such as consistent and verifiable evidence of modification (surface flattening; clearing, stacking, arranging or removal of rocks).

Conclusions

It is widely recognised that high mobility results in inconspicuous material culture imprints, little accumulation and low archaeological visibility (Binford 1980: 7). This essay has
explored what these types of constructions can look like archaeologically, drawing on the analogies provided by nineteenth-century wickiups. Highly mobile groups in warmer climates and varied physiographic environments (such as the Southwestern basin-and-range province) tend to seek terrain sectors (such as elevated rocky projections and rocky slopes) that facilitate successful improvisation, including shelter construction, while maximising security and other factors. This means that no two houses will be exactly alike (in a typological sense), but they will be recognisable as archaeological features because they exhibit consistent and verifiable forms of terrain modification. Highly mobile groups that do not transport their shelters focus on terrain characteristics that allow them to shelter themselves with the least effort, using materials at hand rather than importing materials from afar. Residentially mobile groups, from Palaeolithic people to the historic hunter-gatherer-raider Apache, use the terrain as it is, rather than inflicting substantial modifications. This means their houses are difficult to see, but real nonetheless.

References


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