

“Current UNLV Research on the Virgin Branch Puebloan Culture”

by

Dr. Karen Harry

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Dixie Archaeology Society

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The first portion of Dr. Harry’s presentation dealt with studying the Cultural Identity of the Native Peoples of Southern Nevada. Dr. Harry briefly traced the progression of people from the archaic to the Basketmaker and then the Basketmaker II periods. It is in the Basketmaker II period that the people began to exhibit “Anasazi” traits (farming, etc.).

Her working hypothesis was that the Anasazi people migrated into the Moapa Valley during this time period from the East, consequently bringing their culture into the region. Dr. Harry has worked with researchers from Arizona State University to study this problem.

The ASU researchers have developed a technology to characterize the dental records of human remains and then correlate certain dental traits to the location or origin of those remains. This research has found that the key traits of the Virgin Anasazi in the Moapa Valley are significantly different from those found in the Kayenta Anasazi region. The traits are however similar to Great Basin people from the northern Nevada region. From this, Dr. Harry and her colleagues have concluded that the southern Nevada people were really Great Basin peoples that expanded their population and adopted agriculture and other “Anasazi” customs. She also noted that the people in the Jackson Flat area around Kanab had similar dental traits to the Moapa Valley people versus the Kayenta people.

Dr. Harry discussed the trade routes through the Moapa Valley – north south and east west. Cultural and agricultural influences from all directions focused on the Lost City area. From this she concludes that the ideas for farming maize and irrigation came from the south, from the Hohokam region of Arizona.

The Moapa Valley people adopted many of the Anasazi customs however they did not adopt all of them. They did not have kivas, which were in place in the 900 / 950 AD time period in the Kayenta region. From this she concludes that the religious practices were different. The Anasazi relied on their religion to bring rain, needed for agriculture. The Moapa Valley people were not so dependent on rain, as they utilized irrigation of the Muddy River for their farming. Note – the Muddy River is spring fed while the Virgin River depends on rain and snow in the mountains of Utah.

They also did not have mealing bins, which were prevalent in Kayenta in the 900 / 950 AD time period. This suggests a different social structure. It may also suggest that the farmers did not intentionally “over produce”.

The hunting practices were also different in the Moapa area versus the Kayenta Anasazi region. Studies of archaeological remains in the Moapa region find a significantly larger evidence of large animal bones versus small animal (rabbits) bones. This trend is reversed in the Kayenta region.

She also noted that the lithic technology was different which is consistent with different hunting practices.

Dr. Harry made the following conclusions:

- 1) Agriculture changed the identity of the people – from hunter gathers to farmers

- 2) The Moapa Valley people moved toward the Anasazi in cultural beliefs
- 3) However, they rejected Anasazi customs that interfered with their core beliefs
- 4) Hunting was a core ideology of the Moapa valley people
- 5) Their religion was likely different because they did not rely on rain as much as the Kayenta Anasazi, but rather used irrigation of the Muddy River
- 6) The Moapa Valley people were more individualistic while the Kayenta Anasazi depended upon conformity

The second portion of Dr. Harry's talk focused on the Pottery Trade.

Dr. Harry discussed pottery trade in the Hohokam region. This region had dedicated ceramic production areas. The Hohokam region produced excess pottery that could be used for trade. The Hohokam pottery trade routes may have been up to 20 miles.

Moapa was a large trade center with a population of 800 to 1000 individuals. They could grow two crops per year and also had salt for trade.

Dr. Harry notes the one half of the pottery found in the Moapa Valley came from the Arizona Strip area. From 1050 to 1150, the Shivwits plateau people traded large utilitarian pottery to Moapa Valley, a very long 60-mile trip, and to St. George. Compared to the Hohokam trade distances. The Shivwits plateau contained the red clay that was used for the pottery.

The Moapa gray ware was found to have a unique Olivine (a green colored mineral) temper, which came from the Mount Trumble region. Dr. Harry did not make it clear if the gray ware pottery was made in the Mount Trumble area and traded to Moapa or if the Mount Trumble people only traded Olivine to Moapa for pottery production in the Moapa Valley.

Why specialize in pottery production?

- 1) Not enough agricultural land to support a family
- 2) Potters, therefore, had an elite status because they could create goods for trade

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John Mangels