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PREHISTORIC DESERT FARMERS OF THE SOUTHWEST

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INTRODUCTION

The fact and intensity of their commitment to agriculture is a foremost characteristic that distinguished the prehistoric farmers of the Greater Southwest (82) from their contemporaries to the east, north, and west. As the ultimate members of a continuum of agricultural peoples stretching north from Mesoamerica, pottery-making cultivators in the southwestern United States and adjacent northwestern Mexico (see Figure 1) formed an agricultural peninsula with constantly shifting boundaries among North American groups who were predominantly hunters and gatherers. To understand the environmental context and social role of agriculture, then, is to understand the most essential factors that differentiated the Southwest as a culture area and distinctively shaped the lifeways of its inhabitants. This review explores recent advances in the effort to understand the relationship between society and agriculture in southwestern archaeology.

To those whose perceptions are conditioned by temperate climates and technology of the industrial era, the original occupants of arid southwestern basins, plateaus, and mountains faced daunting challenges to an agricultural lifestyle. Concepts concerning agricultural marginality have played a central role in the study of societal forms and dynamics, as can be seen in current analytical approaches and interpretive frameworks favored by southwestern archaeologists. As Kohler observes (85), "the effectiveness of various ecologi-

that there had been a lapse of 3000 years before cultigens began to support instances of village life and farming economies. Agricultural marginality was implicated in the apparent delay between the appearance of cultigens and visible effects on regional societies. Proposed deterrents to an immediate impact included low yielding types of early corn, the lack of varieties adapted to conditions outside the presumed locale of entry in the relatively cool and moist Mogollon highlands, and the mobility of populations in the Late Archaic period between approximately 2000 B.C. and A.D. 1 (68, 107). According to Wills (173), Late Archaic planting was pursued despite very modest returns because small, predictable harvests allowed activities that in turn improved foraging success.

Re-dating of the earliest Mesoamerican corn from the Tehuacan Valley (95) within a few centuries of the original dates from Bat Cave reveals a new timing of northward transmittal. However, skepticism regarding the existing set of earliest southwestern corn dates (9), and the re-study of Bat Cave (173) had already laid the groundwork for revised models of the southwestern transition. A proliferation of evidence for Late Archaic cultigens has provided further impetus for currently changing ideas.

Late Archaic Cultivators

The widespread distribution of Late Archaic farmers in the Southwest is now supported by the recovery of corn in unexpected locations (e.g. 34, 44, 145, 172) as well as through focused Archaic investigations (e.g. 76, 146, 163) and comprehensive regional sampling (e.g. 64:109–113, 99, 147). Site types yielding these materials range from isolated features to rock shelters to small pithouse villages with substantial middens and numerous burials. Early dates on corn at about 3000 B.P. occur in widely separated locales in the Mogollon highlands, Sonoran and Chihuahuan desert basins, and the Colorado plateaus (176). The early corn is usually described, if at all, as resembling modern Chapalote, although a second variety has been reported in one case (163).

One of the largest and most coherent bodies of information pertaining to Late Archaic farmers comes from the Tucson Basin and adjoining areas in southeastern Arizona (48, 76, 176). Extensive excavations over the last ten years have documented cultigens dated between 3000 and 2000 B.P. at more than fifteen widespread locations. In well studied village sites among these, flotation analyses reveal a ubiquity of corn in the range of later Hohokam settlements (76), and settlement patterns also appear to parallel those of ceramic times (48).

Based on evidence for a pre-ceramic Basketmaker II reliance on crops and close stylistic similarities in projectile points and a few other elements of material culture with Late Archaic manifestations in southern Arizona, Matson (98, see also 9) favors a northward migration of southern cultivators to the