

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF OPPOSITION

## Greenham Common and Peace Camp, Nevada

There is a developing interest in the cultural legacies of the Cold War, which ended in 1989. From an archaeological perspective, however, a significant legacy from the period has been largely ignored. Yet for anyone visiting, Greenham Common, West Berkshire – one of the Cold War's front-line bases – there is a striking contrast between the stark and monumental military architecture and regular plan form, and the now newly wooded peace camps immediately beyond the fence.

### Greenham Common

The Greenham Common fence was the focus of opposition during the latter stages of the Cold War, when ground launched cruise missiles were stored at Greenham, and those opposed to its deployment lived permanently outside the base. Recent investigations at Greenham show that the archaeological evidence for that opposition remains legible. The cruise missile shelters within the so-called GAMA site remain as they were, robust and now empty, their vast doors permanently open. The tattered fence betrays the many break-ins that took place over the years, though the peace camp itself appears only in the remains of painted fence posts and areas of disturbed earth, the traces of clearance that followed many of the evictions.

### Peace Camp, Nevada

Much better preserved are the remains of Peace Camp, the camp established outside the main gate to the Nevada Test Site, some 65 miles north-west of Las Vegas. A survey of the site, undertaken by the authors, recorded and interpreted this archaeological record through conventional archaeological means, but also through oral testimony and archive searches. The objective was to assess this material record, to draw out the contrasts between it and what exists beyond the fence, on the Test Site itself, and finally, to document for the first time how the peace movement manifested itself. Staff of the Desert Research Institute have been studying the Cold War archaeology of the nuclear testing ground for about ten years. Our work is a continuation of that, though telling another side of the story.

Peace Camp is located in the desert, beside the multi-lane highway leading north-west from Las Vegas and opposite the Test Site's main gate; access between the two is through two drainage tunnels and a vehicle underpass beneath the highway. It was (and still is) at Peace Camp where anti-nuclear activists from around the world staged some of the largest civil disobedience actions in America. In 1988, an estimated 8,800 participants were involved in a single protest event, some 2,067 of whom were arrested. From 1986 to 1994, government records document 536 American Peace Test demonstrations near the Test Site involving 37,488 participants, 15,740 of whom were arrested. During the mid- to late-1980s, Peace Camp was permanently occupied; during the current project, some of its former occupants were interviewed.

### Archaeology

Given the remoteness of Peace Camp and the number of participants, it is not surprising that the traces of occupation remain. What was surprising was the complexity of what remains: its diversity of form and the phasing within the site. It appears that there were three peace camps in all. The first dates from the 1950s and is thought to have been a transit camp and meeting place for those on peace marches to the Test Site. Locating and recording this site remains one of the project's objectives, though we believe from participants that this was a relatively small, conventional campsite, at most characterised by hearths and tent pads.

*Part of the history of the Cold War is the opposition to nuclear armament and, in some countries, the expansion of military holdings at the expense of the land's traditional owners. Greenham Common and Peace Camp, Nevada, provided an opportunity to explore this archaeology of opposition, a new dimension to our understanding of Cold War legacies*

*Peace symbols at Peace Camp, outlined in white quartz pebbles, outside (foreground) and within the Nevada Test Site boundary*

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## The archaeology of opposition



Two of the authors recording archaeological features at Peace Camp

The second, largest and best surviving camp lies in the area near the tunnels and was permanently occupied through much of the late-1980s. Traces include stone arrangements in the form of geomorphs, animals, birds (doves, for example) and peace signs and symbols, many reminiscent of Richard Long's sculptures in landscape. There are also outlines of human figures. The site has a distinct plan form: some areas are clearly set aside for occupation (tent pads and hearths) and others perhaps for communal and ceremonial activity (display and artistic intervention). Without exception, the low ridges that cross the site contain concentrations of signs and symbols, typically the peace symbol, often outlined in white quartz pebbles, and white doves. In one area, a 370m-long path bordered by small pebbles winds its way through the vegetation to reach one of these ridges. A stone circle divided by pebbles into quadrants, with distinct groups of offerings and objects in each, marks the location for a prayer pole where the path starts. Close to the tunnels, the name 'Peace Camp' is spelt out with stones.

The third camp was established around 1990, further to the east near the underpass. This is the present Peace Camp and includes both the hearths and tent pads of a campsite and stone arrangements and symbols. Some of these are traditional peace signs, but there are also new forms, such as a large and elaborate floral design, outlined and decorated with stones of different sizes and shapes. Here too is the form perhaps of

a tortoise, sacred to the Western Shoshone Indians on whose ancestral land both this and the Test Site lie. The role of the Western Shoshone in this peace movement, which is also involved in land rights issues, is most apparent at this later camp. Sweat lodges exist for spiritual cleansing, as do 'wickiups', wicker tent-like constructions still built and used by the Shoshone Indians as temporary structures. There are no artefacts to be found at any of these sites, except where they have been left as offerings. Respect for the land ensured that the clean up after each occupation was very thorough. Only the stone arrangements, that had become part of the landscape, remain.

Finally, the material remains of the protest movement – some very recent – are to be found beyond the underpass and along the line of the fence bordering the Test Site. These include peace signs (some painted on the fence posts), small cairns (that are used across the site to indicate other significant places and to serve as navigational aids) and small circular or ovate pebble enclosures around shrubs and cacti.

South-west of the second Peace Camp is what is known to protestors as Pagoda Hill: a conical hill topped with cairns. A protestor built these cairns over several years, travelling there from Peace Camp every day with a new boulder. On the side of the hill is a sculpture of a pregnant female figure painted red.

The entrance to the Test Site includes significant features. Two adjacent pens (one for men, one for women) were placed to detain those arrested; both are fenced enclosures with a single portable lavatory at the centre. There was also a cattle grid, now infilled, that marked the entrance to the Test Site, a feature of significance both for the protestors and the Sheriff's department: anyone who touched the grid was arrested. The sound of a military vehicle driving across the grid served also as a prompt, in the silence of the desert, for howls of opposition. These features, close to the Test Site, form part of the larger landscape of opposition.

### Presentation and understanding

This project has generated much interest. The Western Shoshone spiritual leader, Corbin Harney, conducted a sunrise ceremony during the project that was recorded on film. This ceremony took place immediately outside the Test Site's perimeter fence and provided the opportunity for us to meet former protestors. Corbin Harney later spoke on camera about the significance of Peace Camp, both to the American Indian community and to humanity. The project also attracted media attention (see [www.lvrj.com](http://www.lvrj.com) – March 24, 2002 edition) and is supported by protestors and former inhabitants of the camps. The project is also relevant to the current debate about Yucca Mountain, 20 miles



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Detail of the red lady 'buried' on Pagoda Hill

from the Peace Camp at the western edge of the Test Site. This location was recently designated as the high-level US nuclear waste repository. In May 2002 during the annual Mother's Day demonstrations, protests against nuclear testing combined with protests against this waste repository. If this proposal is confirmed, then a permanently occupied peace camp here or nearer Yucca Mountain may become reality once more.

The project has given Cold War archaeology a new dimension, though further work remains to be done. Interviews with former inhabitants, many from Las Vegas's diverse religious community, may help with interpretation and may also help to distinguish New Age symbolism from that of the Western Shoshone.

Work has begun on the Nevada Atomic Testing History Institute in Las Vegas, including a museum of the Nevada Test Site and its role in America's nuclear testing programme. Following the work at Peace Camp, it is hoped that alongside the displays on atmospheric testing and environmental management will be one on the peace movement and the many events that occurred 'beyond the fence'. □

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*The Peace Camp pathway that leads 370m from an area of occupation to one of the low ridges on which clusters of symbols are typically found*