On Monte Verde

DAVID J. MELTZER
Department of Anthropology
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas 75275

When my co-authors and I (Meltzer et al. 1997:660) urged readers to examine for themselves Dillehay's (1989, 1997) Monte Verde volumes, we meant it. Our views of the site were not intended to be a dictum slavishly followed, nor the final judgment on the matter. Fiedel took us up on our advice, obviously spent a great deal of time picking over the volume, and for that one can have no objections. I certainly don't. Yet, while I applaud his effort, I am disappointed by his method and results. Any of the problems Dillehay ferreted out — as Dillehay and others, and Collins, note in their responses — are rooted in changing numbering systems, varying mapping protocols, the complications of producing and editing the massive results of a multi-year, multi-investigator research program, etc. Errors obviously happened in the process, and they do need to be clarified and corrected. None of us is immune to this sort of thing; take, for example, Fiedel (1999). It seems to me quite clear that Figure 1 in that paper was lifted without attribution and with little modification from Figure 3 in Kunz and Reanier (1994:136) has published pictures of a projectile point in pre-Clovis age levels at Mbadakloof, but so far I have not seen a massive groundswell of support for that site's claims. Today, much of the evidence from a site emerges in post-excavation analysis of radiocarbon samples, sediment chemistry, artifact sources and residues, the isotopic composition of organic remains, the detailed mapping of material and stratigraphy, and so on.

In fact, that being the case, why bother to go to the site? Because, as Huyse argues, what you can see on site can never be fully portrayed in pictures or words, like the setting and surroundings, the complexity of the stratigraphy, the position of artifacts in the deposits and on the surfaces (if you arrive in time, of course, and we did not — but we did have a chance to directly examine many of the artifacts. You can even get a feel for how difficult the sediment was to excavate or how easy it might have been to miss potentially mixed items in the deposits. Dillehay welcomed us to do all that, and ultimately we went to Monte Verde — that it happened to be just 9 months shy of the 70th anniversary of the Folsom visit was a coincidence, though one not without historical irony.

A few months after our return, and after we all had a chance to mull over what we saw, Donald Grayson and I drafted up a statement that was circulated to all of those who were on the visit (and who were not affiliated with the Monte Verde research team). All who signed on to it therefore had a chance to examine it in the cold light of day and well after any bruised egos or perceived twisted elbows had fully healed. Everyone did sign it, because all of us felt, after asking the questions Fiedel asked and a whole lot more, and being satisfied with the answers, that the site was archaeological and 12,500 years old (Meltzer et al. 1997). Many of us had lingering questions about the character of the artifacts assemblages and their interpretation,
Monte Verde and the Pre-Clovis Situation in America

VANCE HAYNES

Department of Anthropology and Geosciences
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona 85721

Some anthropologists have used the Monte Verde site as the break-through that requires a new paradigm (e.g., Ammrod Trumpet, V. 13, N. 3, 1998) much as with the initial Folsom site discovery. As one who participated in the 1997 site evaluation, I can say it is certainly not the modern equivalent of the breakthrough created by the discovery in the 1920s of 10 or more Folsom projectile points among the skeletons of more than 20 extinct bison buried under 1-3 m of stratified alluvial sediments. In early January, 1997, the very important but controversial Monte Verde archaeological site in southern Chile was examined by 13 specialists representing several scientific disciplines (M. et al, 1997). The early part of the conference was devoted to the examination of artifacts and site data, as well as orientation lectures by the principal investigators from the site. The last days were spent in the field for orientation with respect to the regional geology and archaeology, and one day examining the Monte Verde site and collecting samples for geochronological testing.

As the Monte Verde site visit was being planned, one of the sponsors stated that a consensus would be required. I found this to be an unreasonable request and replied that it was unlikely. However, by the final evening in Chile it was obvious that I was the only hold-out. I would have much preferred a chance to read the second volume (Dillehay 1997) before making a decision on the spot. My reservations were about the provenience of the six unequivocal stone artifacts. Because of the preliminary reading of the poor quality preprint of Volume II (Dillehay 1997) I was forced to evaluate the radiocarbon dating and the stratigraphic provenience of the samples analyzed for C-14. It was not until my return from the field trip that I could take the time to look up the specific provenience of each stone tool in the various site reports (Dillehay 1989, 1997). To my surprise, I found these data to be inadequate and therefore unconvincing.

At the Monte Verde site there are six stone artifacts, unquestionably the work of prehistoric people that have reportedly been found in stratigraphic contact with associated wood and charcoal that yielded eleven radiocarbon ages averaging about 12,500 B.P. (Dillehay 1997). Those of the unequivocal artifacts are misidentifications of willow-leaf-shaped projectile points (X1500001, A0100026, and D-S-1), two very well made. Another artifact is a polished slate rod (A1300001). Yet another is a stream-rounded rhyolite cobble that may be a core or may have served as a chopping tool (A0104001). A large quartzite biface (B1005000) is not considered here because it was not found in situ (Dillehay 1997:612). In my opinion, all of the other items proposed as artifacts are equivocal, some highly so. Regardless of these opinions, many, if not most, of the more equivocal artifacts of wood, stone, and bone may be cultural items associated with the occupation surface as claimed. However, Fiedel describes many discrepancies in the location and mapping.

It is very important to thoroughly understand the stratigraphy of the Monte Verde site before evaluating the provenience of each document that is overlooked, the relationship of one to another (see Haynes, 1999) and the complete listing of radiocarbon dates (see Dillehay 1997: Table 3.1). Figure 1 is a generalized stratigraphic cross-section of the site. While not precise, it is accurate. The youngest stratum underlying the surface of the occupation bearing these artifacts is a channel gravel (M-V-6) that has no organic material suitable for radiocarbon dating but unconvincingly overlies an erosional surface (contact Y1 of Figure 1) on an alluvial volcanic sand (M-V-7) with uncalibrated radiocarbon ages of 23,660±320 B.P. (BETA-35135) and 27,860±310 B.P. (BETA-11498). The oldest stratum overlying the cultural layer is a peat deposit (M-V-5) dating between 10,330 B.P. and 10,330 B.P., on the basis of seven radiocarbon ages (Figure 1). The peat covers the occupation surface and is thickest (15-30 cm) in low areas underlain by the channel gravel (M-V-6) and thins out upslope away from the M-V-6 channel. The basal contact, Y2, of the M-V-5 peat with the M-V-6 gravel joins the Y1 contact away from the channel in a uniform conformable contact Y1-2 (Figure 1), which is the occupation surface. All six of the unquestionable stone artifacts reportedly occurred directly below and were covered by the M-V-5 peat.

In accepting this site on the basis of the six unequivocal stone artifacts, I still have reservations about the following aspects:

1. All but one of the wood artifacts that I examined are questionable and probably would not be considered artifacts out of context. Figure 7.30 (Dillehay 1997:156) is the best candidate I saw. However, I have no personal experience with crude wooden artifacts. Unfortunately, we were not able to see the longitudinal grooved log (Figure 7.26) and the log with burnt fire-stick holes (Dillehay 1997, Figure 7.41). These appear to be the least equivocal of the wooden artifacts, but were informed that these were lost due to poor curation in the case of the grooved log, and the bored log could not be found. In our walk through the remnants of the beach forest I noticed a weathered log segment with irregularly spaced holes much like those in photographs of the missing fire-starting log.

2. Many of the stone artifacts I examined were questionable and would not be considered actual out of context. While at the University of Kentucky in 1997 during the tour, Dillehay explained that this is typical of early lithic assemblages in South America. This is disputed by Lynch (1990, and personal communication, 1998).

No where in either Volume I or II by Dillehay can I find any data specifically devoted to the micro-stratigraphic provenience of each of the unequivocal artifacts. My review of the provenience of the six unequivocal stone artifacts, while similar to that of Fiedel’s, is not as thorough. Fiedel has taken the time and effort to thoroughly evaluate the 1300-page Volume II report, checking and counter-checking every point. Rather than repeat my findings that duplicate those of Fiedel, I simply repeat the deficiencies I see in the reporting.

The overlying strata are not discussed specifically in regard to projectile points, the polished slate rod, the grooved bolo stone or the core-chopper. It would be helpful to know the depth of each occurrence below the modern surface, the thickness of M-V-5 over each one and the presence or absence of intervening strata. Unfortunately, no photographs of any of these unequivocal artifacts in situ are shown in publications. Dillehay et al. state in their response that the reason is poor quality in making prints from “fuzzy” slides. Even so, if the artifacts are all recognizable, the images of them in place would be of interest. Who actually excavated each artifact? Perhaps they would have taken photographs in situ or even made notes regarding their find which, I expect, would have raised considerable interest at the time of discovery.

In the absence of skeptical professional inquiry, as done at Folsom in 1927 and 1928, such procedures are needed demonstrating the position of each artifact with respect to the basal contact of M-V-5 and the overlying and underlaying strata would have gone a long way toward validating Monte Verde.