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A Charmstone from the Sea off Point Conception, California

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Marked on nautical charts where the coast of California makes an abrupt bend is a conspicuous extension of land known as Point Conception. Here, the California coastline runs east-west, its southward facement somewhat protected from the waters of the Pacific by a parallel chain of offshore islands.

Coldwater upwelling around Point Conception has made it a rich marine environment, one which commercial divers have found extremely productive in terms of abalone and sea urchin. But these are not the only items the divers have been finding on the sea floor here, for the area is also rich in artifacts. During the past quarter-century a number of nonarchaeologically trained divers have been recovering them.

From interviews with these divers, examinations of their finds, and some limited fieldwork, Hudson (1976) concluded that the waters off Point Conception were archaeologically sensitive. Indeed, of the approximately 48 marine archaeological localities (sites) presently known for the Santa Barbara Channel—an area which extends over 110 km. in length and 50 km. in width—no less than 25% of the localities, or 12 sites, are situated

within a 5 km. radius of the point. Certainly this distribution reflects sampling of the ocean floor (concentration of commercial divers, who are finding the objects, in this region as opposed to other areas along the coast), but it remains equally true that Point Conception abounds in archaeological resources.

Recovering artifacts from the sea floor should come as no surprise to California archaeologists, and Hudson (1976:45-49) has advanced several explanations to account for them, three of which concern Point Conception.

The first concerns cliffing. Coastal areas along the channel are frequently capped by middens, and as the cliffs erode their contents are dropped into the sea. At Point Conception, site Marine 16 (locations of the various marine archaeological loci are shown in Fig. 1) is an example. The artifacts are often found in shallow water—sometimes within the surf zone itself—or perhaps seaward as much as 1 km. These localities, which have little significance, may yet prove to be of great importance in the geological study of coastal erosion, such as in determining the rate of cliff retreat using datable artifacts found at sea. The problems are numerous, but the potential input of archaeological data is obvious.

The second explanation involves fishing stations, represented by the recovery of sinkers used by Indians on various lines and nets. It is known that the coastal Chumash, who were hunter-gatherers, had a highly developed maritime focus, and that they exploited the waters of the Channel using complex tech-

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nology, among which was the uniquely built plank canoe or *Tomol* (Hudson, Timbrook, and Rempe 1978). Grooved stones, which appear to be weights for large gill nets, have been recovered from two localities near Point Conception, Marine 28 (at depth of 15.2 m.) and Marine 34 (at 21 m. depth). The significance of these sites rests upon the information they can provide on fishing technology and in locating the actual fishing grounds exploited.

The last explanation concerns an obvious attempt on the part of the Chumash (and their predecessors) to discard objects into the sea. The objects most frequently found which reflect this behavior are small- to medium-sized sandstone bowls, usually concentrated in small numbers at a given locality. Some of the sites are as far as 1.6 km. from shore and in waters up to 30 m. deep. Examples near Point

Conception are sites Marine 12, 14-16, 31, 38, 40, 42, 46, and 48, with a fragment of a bowl also found at Marine 28, a suspected fishing location.

These objects are considered significant because they provide information on religious practices. It is known that the Chumash made offerings at shrines to terrestrial features and beings, as well as to celestial ones (Hudson and Underhay 1978), and, given the importance of the sea in their subsistence, it is reasonable to infer that the practice may have been extended to marine features as well. We do know that in particular situations—times of stress for an individual—objects were discarded into the sea as offerings. We also know that water served as an interface between the sacred and the profane, as well as having the property to neutralize very powerful supernatural objects

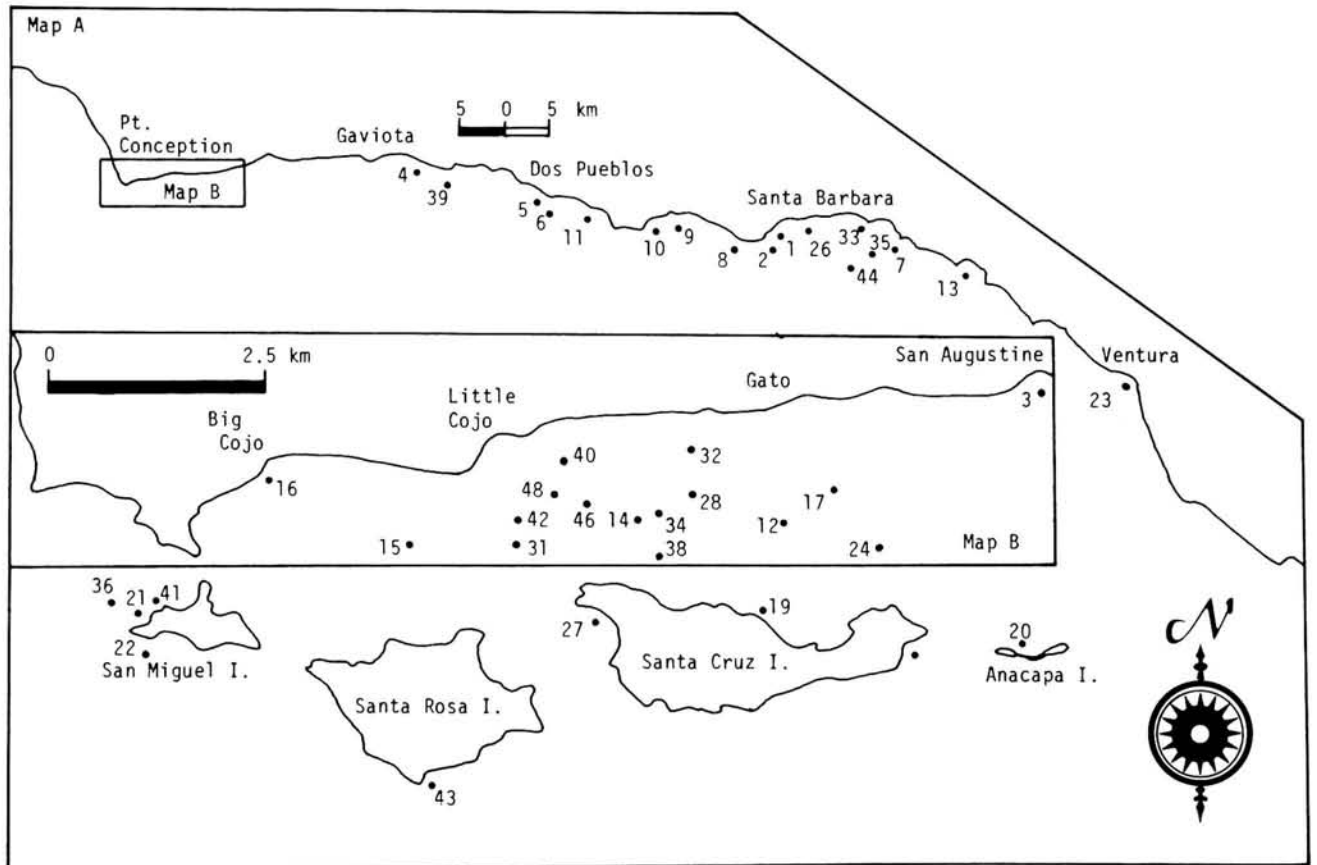


Fig. 1. Distribution of Marine Archaeological Localities in the Santa Barbara Channel (After Hudson 1976:9, with new data plotted).

(Blackburn 1975). It should be stressed too that we know that Point Conception was considered the last stopping place for the soul during its westward journey across the sea to reach the land of the dead (Blackburn 1975). It is therefore quite possible that some aspects of Chumash ritual behavior can be identified on the basis of these items intentionally discarded into the sea.

Yet another explanation may occur to the reader, namely, that of submerged habitation sites due to post-Pleistocene sea level rise. Although there are several candidates for inundated habitation sites along the Channel coast, none is thus far known for Point Conception (Hudson 1976).

Because of these finds, a marine archaeological survey was performed when a portion of the region was selected for the site of a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) facility. The objective of the project was to locate and identify marine cultural resources that might be disturbed in compliance with the objectives of various environmental protection acts. For the LNG facility, such disturbance would consist of the construction in the sea of a marine trestle (pier), breakwater, and seawater exchange pipes. The survey was undertaken by Stickel (1977), using a SCUBA search plan. No cultural resources of significance were found within the LNG project area.

Two years later, however, while diving in area I-E 10 m. west of a marker buoy for the proposed LNG trestle, a marine biologist named Peter Haaker recovered a cigar-shaped charmstone in 10.1 m. of water (37 ft.). The location was about 800 m. from shore and within the sector that had been searched by means of SCUBA. The bottom consisted of hard clay mudstone with kelp attached to it, the exposed strata running roughly east-west (Figs. 2, 3). The charmstone was found near a southward-facing ledge on the mudstone surface, and was conspicuous by its shape.

Covered with coralline algae (red-stained

color), bryozoans (whitish-gray stained color), as well as convoluted encrustations produced from the tubes of marine worms, the charm-

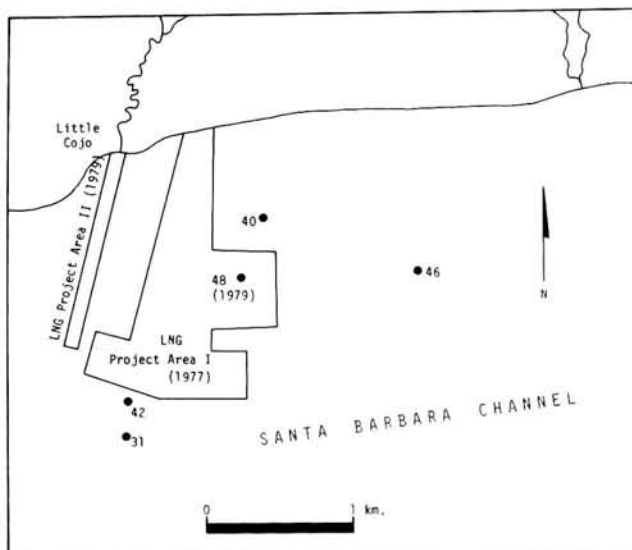


Fig. 2. Location of Marine Archaeological Localities in relationship to LNG Project Areas. Localities 40, 42, 46, and 48 (the charmstone) became known after the original survey in March and April 1977.

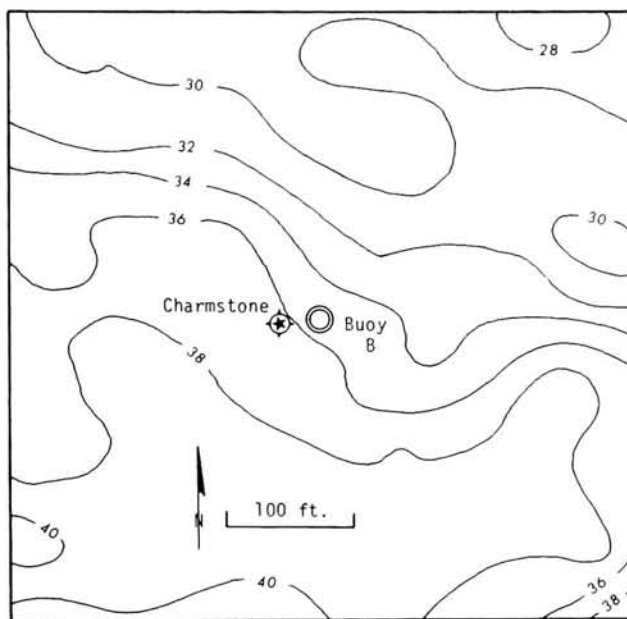


Fig. 3. Bathymetry in the area of Marine Locality 48, showing the position of the charmstone. Depths given in feet. UTM coordinates for Buoy B are: Zone 11, N 352,815.00, E 1,274,051.00. It is located 3200 ft. south (181°) of abutment marker on shore.

stone was somewhat camouflaged by the sea floor upon which it was found. In addition, since the encrustations and staining are present on all surfaces of the object, it indicates that it was never permanently fixed, but rather moved about. Donated to the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History (SBMNH:NA-CA-SBaXX-6A-3) by Mr. Haaker, the object measures 30.4+ cm. long and 2.5 cm. in maximum diameter. One of its tapering ends is missing and the other is semi-blunt. The sandstone from which it is made is very fine-grained, and the shape is highly symmetrical. Where exposed, the sandstone is a dark gray color (Fig. 4).

There are two possible explanations which can be offered to account for the occurrence of this charmstone on the ocean floor. First, it may have been eroded out of a nearby coastal site, such as SBa-546, a site located directly shoreward, but apparently not undergoing erosion by cliff retreat. Or second (and a more logical possibility), like the numerous bowls found in the area, the object represents some sort of ceremonial deposition. Charmstones were conceived of as objects with vast supernatural power (their owners were capable of causing sickness, death, earthquakes, forest fires, storms, and so forth [Henshaw 1885; Yates 1889, 1890]), and the Chumash (and their predecessors?) considered water an effective means by which to neutralize such power (Blackburn 1975). It is therefore possible that the object in question was deposited in the sea to eliminate its supernatural powers. The age of the specimen cannot be determined at this time, but once this can be estimated, perhaps it will allow us to choose from the alternative explanations.

Whatever the explanation, the discovery of a charmstone in waters off California represents not only a unique find, but perhaps one with special importance as we come to know more about California's past.



Fig. 4. Charmstone (SBMNH No.: NA-CA-SBaXX-6A-2) recovered at Marine Locality 48. Object measures 30.4 cm. long. Photograph by L. P. Mann, Brooks Institute.

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Three Baked Clay Figurines from Antelope Valley, California

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During mitigation work undertaken at a small occupation site (LAn-771) on Edwards Air Force Base in 1977 (Sutton 1977, 1978), a small baked clay figurine fragment with a punctate design was recovered. When this piece was shown to R. W. Robinson at Antelope Valley College, he remembered having recovered two similar artifacts during his excavations at Ker-303, a large occupation site about 25 miles west of LAn-771.

This report describes these three artifacts and offers some limited comparisons with other figurines from southern California. These specimens are the first reported fired clay figurines from the Antelope Valley, the southwesternmost part of the Mojave Desert.

The LAn-771 site is located just south of Buckhorn Dry Lake. The site probably dates within the last thousand years and seems to have been abandoned prior to the protohistoric period. The figurine recovered from the site (Fig. 1, lower) is a fragment of a larger piece, being broken at the bottom. It is slightly "S" shaped in profile and comes to a point at the top. It is decorated with a rather systematic pattern of punctate depressions. The depressions were made by sticking a small instrument straight into the clay, leaving a small hole. The piece had been fired and is light tan in color.

Two other figurines were recovered from Ker-303, located in the northwestern part of the valley. This site was excavated by Antelope Valley College in 1972-76. It is a major village site dated by several radiocarbon assays to between 500 B.C. and A.D. 1700 (R. W. Robinson, personal communication).

