

UC Merced
Journal of California and Great Basin
Anthropology

Title

A Bronze Sword Grip from Chumash Territory

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3x0413px>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 4(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

Lee, Georgia

Publication Date

1982-07-01

Peer reviewed

A Bronze Sword Grip from Chumash Territory

GEORGIA LEE

A cast bronze sword grip in the shape of a crouching lion was excavated from the north side of the creek at Smuggler's Cove (Site 138) by Ronald Olson during his 1928 excavations on Santa Cruz Island (Fig. 1). This unusual artifact came from "Pit K" at a depth of 18 inches. It is now housed at the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, Univ. of California, Berkeley.

The sword grip weighs 106.2 g. It measures 10.5 cm. in length, is 2.3 cm. wide, and 2 cm. thick. The inside dimension of the tang opening is one by two centimeters. The patinated surface displays colors ranging from blue green to yellow green, with some touches of red orange. The creature's head is partially missing. It originally had a knuckle bow attached to the quillon at one end with the other end springing from the mouth. This has been forcefully wrenched off, taking a portion of the head with it.

It is possible that this grip may have been the handle of an *espada ancha* (broad sword), or some other weapon of that kind. Two swords with similar handles are known. Both are still attached to blades and have been identified by Dr. James Moriarty, III, as examples of the *espada ancha* carried by Mexican lancers as a secondary weapon. Housed in a scabbard located under the right

knee of the cavalry man, the weapon could be drawn with ease by the left hand while a lance was held in the right hand. One of these swords is in Dr. Moriarty's collection; it was found wedged between two walls in Mission San Diego de Alcala. The other was recovered from the battlefield of San Pascual. (cf. Brinkerhoff and Chamberlain 1972:Pl. 136). These two swords have a grip design consisting of a crouching feline, and were manufactured in San Diego for Mexican lancers shortly after the Mexican revolution. At the time, each cavalry group chose its own hilt design. Sword grips were fabricated from 1833 to 1846, when the cavalry units were disbanded. The two San Diego specimens lack maker's identifying hallmarks, which suggests that they were made by local San Diego blacksmiths (J. R. Moriarty, personal communication).

A comparison of the Santa Cruz Island sword grip with the two from San Diego reveals certain stylistic differences. Although they show roughly the same configuration, the Santa Cruz Island example has sharply engraved lines; especially around the forelegs and on the back of the neck to indicate a mane, and in the lower front portion between the haunches and feet where a decorative palmette design has been engraved. The San Diego sword grips lack such features. These similarities and differences suggest that the grips have been fashioned after a particular prototype. However, except for the aforementioned illustration of one of the San Diego swords in Brinkerhoff and Chamberlain, a literature search on the subject of early

Georgia Lee, Institute of Archaeology, Univ. of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

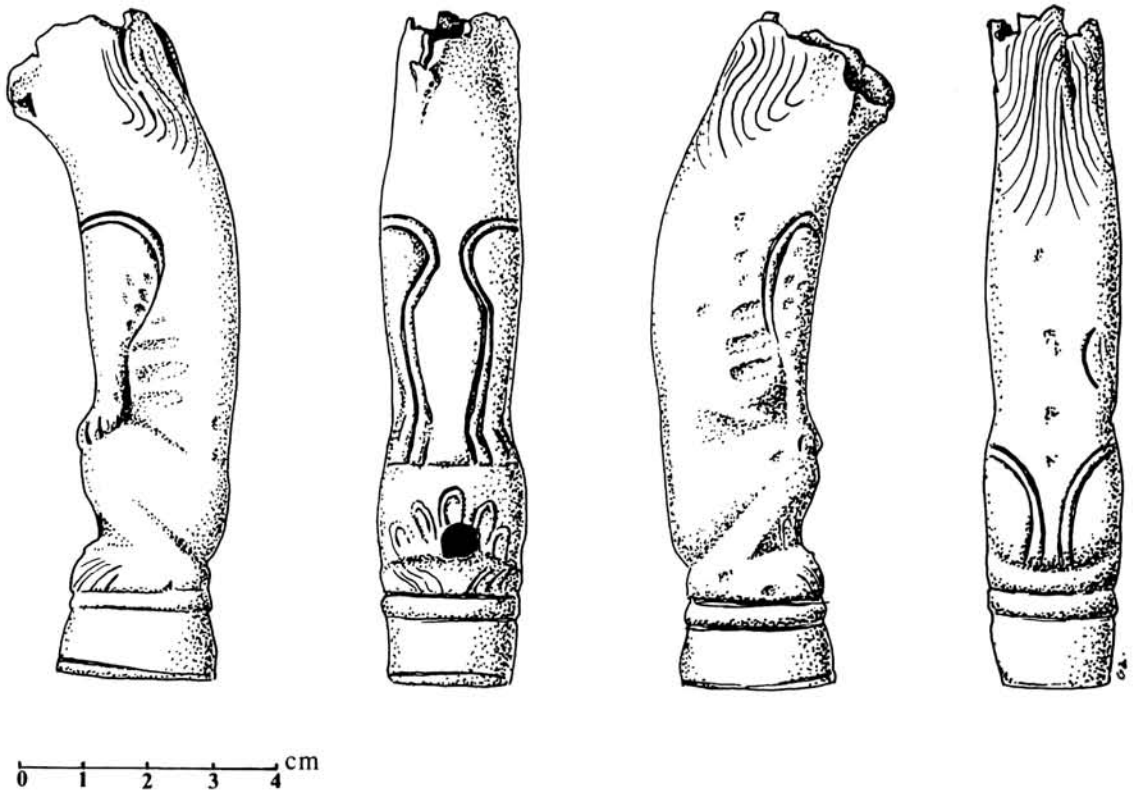


Fig. 1. Bronze sword grip from Santa Cruz Island (UCLMA 1-37050), recovered by Ronald Olson in 1928. Although the head is missing, it clearly represents a feline, probably a lion.

weapons has failed to turn up a parallel.

A clue to the origin of the sword grip from Santa Cruz Island may come from the associated artifacts found by Olson in 1928. All were located less than a foot away from the disturbed bones of a burial and, beside the sword grip, include: a flint arrow point, a lump of red ochre, a small reddish stone fragment, seven small flint flakes, stone and shell fragments, *Olivella* shell and fragments, 18 tubular shell beads, an abalone crescent, two *Olivella* beads with asphalt, two molded asphalt fragments, bone implement fragments, a claw, two bone whistles, a tubular bone bead, cloth fragments, and glass beads with some decoration (catalog entries, Lowie Museum of Anthropology). According to Chester King (Larry Wilcoxon, personal com-

munication), these glass beads represent Spanish colonization and predate A.D. 1805.

Many historic artifacts have turned up in Chumash sites, often in association with burials. A sword blade from an *espada ancha*, a knife blade, and a Spanish coin were excavated from Dos Pueblos (north of Santa Barbara) in the 1930s. Reputedly taken from one Chumash burial, these items are now housed in a private collection. The coin bears the date 1762 and the name of Carlos III.

Wheeler (1879:38) noted an "iron instrument" fourteen inches in length, along with an iron nail, under a skeleton at La Patera (Santa Barbara) and he also recovered three iron knives, an iron axe of "undoubted early Spanish manufacture," and a copper pan eight inches in diameter which had been placed

over a skull.

In 1877, the Reverend Stephen Bowers recorded two copper vessels among the aboriginal artifacts excavated at Goleta (near Santa Barbara). These may have been from the historic village of *Saspilil* (Wilcoxon, personal communication).

Articles of "white manufacture" from Santa Cruz Island were cited by Rogers (1929:312, 320); these include glass beads, and artifacts of iron and copper. Also, in deep gorges on the island he found small camp sites that featured bits of cloth, rusty iron fragments, glass beads, brass buttons, and bottle fragments. Rogers (1929:341) suggested this evidence could indicate that the islanders may have been attempting—in historical times—to isolate themselves in the interior portions of the island.

Clearly, such exotic items were considered to be objects of special power by indigenous populations who placed them in graves as either offerings to the dead or as prized possessions of the deceased.

It is assumed that the sword grip originated in either Mexico or Spain. The double outline around the front legs of the lion is a stylistic tradition, diffused from the Near East, which was common in Europe from Romanesque times onward. This would fit in with a Spanish origin, as much Near Eastern influence can be seen in Spanish art and artifacts. It is difficult to say if the design reflects a time period or merely a workshop unaware of the latest stylistic changes, or an heirloom design. Obviously, any Mexican workshop would have been heavily influenced by Spanish designs. The palmette motif above the stud hole is too widely disseminated to be suggestive of a given area or time period. Metallographical examination of the sword grip might help to affix a place of origin for this object. It is hoped that, by bringing this sword grip to the attention of others, similar examples may be located.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Dr. James R. Moriarty, III, of the University of San Diego for his assistance; Dr. Travis Hudson and Larry Wilcoxon of Santa Barbara for comments and suggestions; the Lowie Museum of Anthropology for allowing access to the collection; and to Dr. C. W. Clewlow, Jr., for bringing the artifact to my attention. The late Dr. Robert Heizer was the first to express an interest in this sword grip.

REFERENCES

- Brinkerhoff, Sidney B., and Pierce A. Chamberlain
1972 *Spanish Military Weapons in Colonial America 1700-1821*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stockpole.
- Rogers, David Banks
1929 *Prehistoric man of the Santa Barbara coast*. Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.
- Wheeler, Lt. George M.
1879 *Report, United States Geographical Surveys West of the Hundredth Meridian, Vol. 7, Archaeology*. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office.



Costanoan Astronomy from the Notes of John P. Harrington

TRAVIS HUDSON

Data which concern Costanoan astronomy are of considerable importance to California scholars, since so little of this aspect of that culture has survived. It was thus with great delight that I received from Miss Barbara Bocek, a Stanford graduate student under-

Travis Hudson, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, 2559 Puesta del Sol Rd., Santa Barbara, CA 93105.