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Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jz9g620>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 2(2)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

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Publication Date

1980-12-01

Peer reviewed

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An Unusual Carved Figure from the Chumash Area

GEORGIA LEE

A carved whale bone figure from a private collection in Santa Barbara was long considered by the author to be a child's doll; however, an account of Gabrielino shamanism by Hudson (1979) in a recent issue of the *Journal* has prompted re-evaluation of this object.

The figure is roughly carved from whale bone which is honeycombed with small eroded cavities (Fig. 1). It measures 13.7 by 4.5 cm. and is 4 cm. at the thickest point, which is the head. It is armless and legless. Wedge-shaped in profile, the back is flat and the figure tapers to a chisel shape at the lower edge. The sides are slightly carved, giving hip-like protuberances to the frontal view. This forms an indented area which could have held bindings in place. Indeed, the texture of the effigy at these points suggests they were not as exposed as the rest of the figure. The head is rounded. Smooth circular areas can be seen on each side of the head where the original bone surface was not removed. The bone may be from any of a dozen of large species of whale; the part utilized appears to be from the lateral process and centrum of the vertebrae.¹ The facial features are roughly suggested by two holes for the eyes and a slash for the mouth. The neck is partially shaped, partially natural—this being the area of bone where sutures are formed.

The body is perforated front to rear at about midsection. Traces of rust appear at these two orifices. A trace of rust can be seen at one spot on the lower back, and two faint rust spots appear on the head. The perforation is positioned so that if hung from this aperture, the figure would be suspended head down. This would also be true if nailed; however, there are no pressure marks near the holes that would suggest evidence of a nail head. Because of its full relief and apparent human form, the figure is both unique and striking.

The lack of provenience for this artifact presents a problem. It is part of a large collection of Chumash artifacts excavated in earlier days mainly from coastal Chumash sites. The excavator, however, kept no records of locations or associations. We have no reason to doubt the authenticity of this collection, and are thus assuming that the figure in question came from a local Chumash site. An alternate

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possibility exists: it may have been traded or given to the collector.

This artifact might be one of two things: a child's toy; or some sort of ritual object. According to existing ethnographic evidence (Hudson and Blackburn n.d.) children's dolls were made of unfired clay, rags, or rabbit skins stuffed with grass. No mention is made of dolls fashioned from bone. One would also expect more of these in the archaeological record if it were a popular type of toy.

A wood effigy figure from Ventura is described by Hudson (1979:359). It was about 2½ feet tall, had articulated arms and legs which, when twisted, would—it was believed—cause a corresponding affliction upon the enemy. Closer in concept to the figure in question are the small sculptured effigies found throughout the southern California area. These are frequently carved from steatite, other types of stone, bone,² or fashioned from clay, and are noted for their sculptural quality.

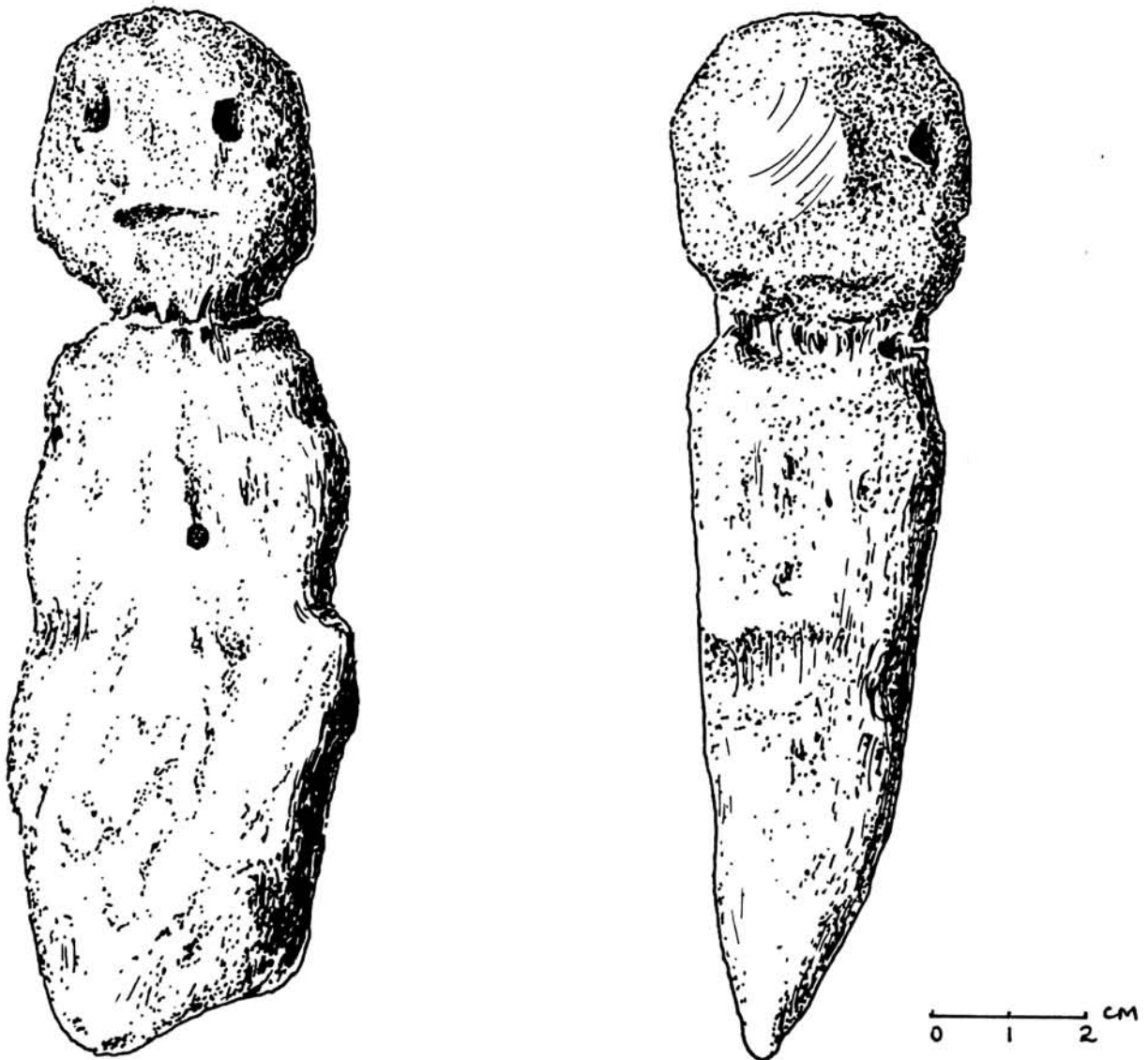


Fig. 1. Carved whale bone figure from Chumash area.

Many are in the form of birds, sea mammals, fish, and canoes. Anthropomorphic effigies have not yet been recorded in the Chumash area, although several small sculptures collected by de Cessac (1951) are—according to him—extremely stylized human figures. These bear no resemblance to the figure in question.

Ethnographic evidence of their use leaves little doubt that supernatural power was associated with small sculptures. They appear to have been sacred talismen, and were used by individuals who wished to acquire, manipulate, and strengthen a supernatural bond with a dream helper (Applegate 1978; Hudson, Timbrook, and Rempe 1978:128).

In the account of Gabrielino shamanism (Hudson 1979), wizards are described as hanging little figures head downward as part of casting a spell to cause illness and death. It may be significant that this figure—if suspended from the hole that perforates the body—would hang downward, as described in the story of the island *hechiceros*.

The possibility also exists that this was carved and left behind by one of the Aleut hunters who were in this area in historic times. In that case, it most likely would have been a power figure of some sort, rather than a toy.

One can only hope that other similar figures from this area may be located in order that comparisons can be made and this compelling little figure may be fixed more securely in time and space.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Dr. Travis Hudson, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History for his suggestions; Bill Hyder and Mark Oliver for editorial comment; and Leontine Phelan.

NOTES

1. The bone identification was made by Dr. Charles Woodhouse, Assistant Director and Curator of Vertebrate Zoology and Paul Collins, Assistant Curator of Vertebrate Zoology, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

2. Although the vast majority of known effigies from the Chumash and Gabrielino areas are of stone, some bone examples have been noted. It is interesting that these represent avifauna: (1) two whale bone effigies from Santa Barbara Island, carved in the form of highly stylized pelican effigies (Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History); (2) a double-headed bone pelican effigy from San Nicolas Island (San Diego Museum of Man); (3) a pelican of bone, stylized almost into a two-headed form (Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History); and (4) a double-headed bone effigy collected from Santa Catalina Island (Lowie Museum of Anthropology). The double-headed fetish is occasionally found among Zuni effigies; it was believed to have "twice the power" (Ritter and Ritter 1976:156).

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A Wiyot Fancy Basket

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The Wiyot were a coastal people who once inhabited the region of Humboldt County, California, between Cape Mendocino on the south and the watershed of the Mad River on the north. Located on some of the rare flat coast land north of San Francisco, the Wiyot were early victims of White American incursion. With their population greatly reduced by the 1860's (Elsasser 1978a:161-162), there were few Wiyot baskets for sale to the travelers who made California Indian basket collections around the turn of the century. This is especially true in the case of the basket type called the fancy basket.

A fancy basket, sometimes called a treasure (Elsasser 1978b:632), trinket (Merriam n.d.), or gift basket, is a decorated basket of no obvious work-function. The fancy basket was an aboriginal type for most basket-weaving cultures of California. It was made to store small items or to be presented as a gift and as an example of a woman's pride in her work. It is the basket type which sold best to collectors, so it is the type most often found in collections. Wiyot basket weavers, however, had relatively little opportunity to develop the trade in fancy baskets and they are rare in collections now.

In the first decade of the 1900's, Ella Branstetter Ries of Ferndale, California, was making regular trips to the Wiyot town of Ho'ket¹ at the mouth of the Salt River. According to her daughter, Mrs. Ries took clothing to the Indian families there and taught the women and girls to sew. In return, the Wiyot women gave her baskets for her collection.

The collection numbered 110 baskets—mostly Wiyot—when it was photographed in 1910. Subsequently, all but three baskets were destroyed while in storage. Of the three baskets which remain, one, shown in Figures 1 and 2, is one of the few—perhaps the only—documented Wiyot fancy basket in existence.

The basket is 30 cm. in height and approximately 50 cm. in diameter at its widest point. For warps, the weaver probably used peeled willow (*Salix* sp.) shoots, though obviously—



Fig. 1. Side view of Wiyot fancy basket.

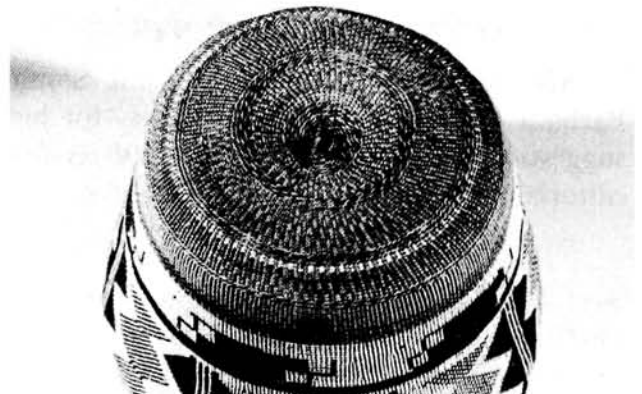


Fig. 2. Bottom view of Wiyot fancy basket.

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