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## On Arborglyphs and Arborgraphs

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*In 1846, an arborglyph drawn on a cottonwood tree near Kern River was recorded by a member of the Frémont party; it may well be the only such record still extant. The scene depicted appears to involve vaqueros roping tule elk, and possibly represents a traditional native response to initial contacts with Euromericans.*

Some years ago, Saint-Onge et al. (2009) published a description of an apparent Chumash arborglyph incised or carved into the trunk of a live oak tree in San Luis Obispo County, pointed out its striking similarity to motifs present at a number of important Chumash pictographs sites, and advanced the hypothesis that it had significant archaeoastronomical implications. In the course of their discussion, they cited Fr. José Señán's 1815 observation that the Indians "on barks and on tree trunks do sometimes draw the figures of certain animals," drew attention to ethnographic accounts of trees being painted or decorated and used as shrines, and suggested that the arborglyph might "be representative of a type of ritual site that once was more widespread than is currently recognized" (2009:49–50).

The purpose of the present brief note is to call attention to what I believe to be a well-documented, historically-significant, and probably unique rendition of a Native Californian arborglyph that seems to have been generally overlooked in earlier discussions of the topic. The arborglyph in question was originally sketched by Edward Kern in 1846, somewhere along the Kern River. Edward Kern accompanied the John C. Frémont expedition of 1845–46 as an expeditionary artist, and he was a member of the detachment that Frémont sent through Walker Pass into the San Joaquin Valley, with orders to rendezvous at Kings River. The party's leader, Joseph Walker, mistook the Kern River for Kings River, and the group waited unsuccessfully for Frémont's arrival for some time before departing (Spence and Jackson 1973:57–8, 61). Kern's original sketch was redrawn in 1853 by his brother Richard Kern and submitted with other drawings to Henry Schoolcraft for inclusion in the

latter's famous six-volume compendium of information on the Indians of North America. Richard Kern's drawing (Fig. 1) was subsequently turned into a lithograph by Seth Eastman and published (Schoolcraft 1854:252–53), along with the following comment by Richard concerning its provenience: "Of the accompanying copies of Indian drawings, Fig. A, Plate 33, was found on the trunk of a cotton-wood tree in the valley of King's river, California, and evidently represents the manner of catching different wild animals with the lasso...."

Although the arborglyph was obviously created sometime between 1771–2 (when the first local missions were established) and 1846, since it depicts *vaqueros* roping animals from horseback, it closely resembles pictographs typical of the region and shows little stylistic evidence of Euromerican influences other than the subject matter. It is interesting that the animals depicted are clearly cervids (deer or elk) and not (as one might expect) cattle, and are most likely—judging from their apparent size and the shape of their antlers—tule elk, which were particularly abundant in the marshlands in the Tulare Lake region. As Stine (1980:21–32) has pointed out, prior to Mexican independence in 1821, elk were hunted in relatively small numbers, and primarily for leather and tallow; the Spanish appeared to prefer the meat of domestic animals over that from wild game. However, by the 1820s the establishment of ranchos in areas farther inland from the missions, the relaxation of strict Spanish trade policies, and the accessibility of rapidly expanding herds of cattle and other domestic livestock led to an increasing emphasis on hides and tallow as the primary commodities available to the *Californios* for export, and elk also began to be exploited on an almost commercial scale. Beginning in 1826, groups of *vaqueros* would travel into the San Joaquin Valley during the spring and summer to rope and slaughter considerable numbers of tule elk, primarily for their tallow, which was greatly prized in the United States for making candles and in both Peru and California for cooking.

Why was such a seemingly mundane activity as elk hunting depicted in an arborglyph, and when and by whom was it created? It might be suggested that the scene was drawn by individuals familiar with horses with riders, such as former neophytes or refugees from the missions, who were simply depicting or commemorating a secular activity and a way of life with which they were relatively familiar or that they had personally observed.

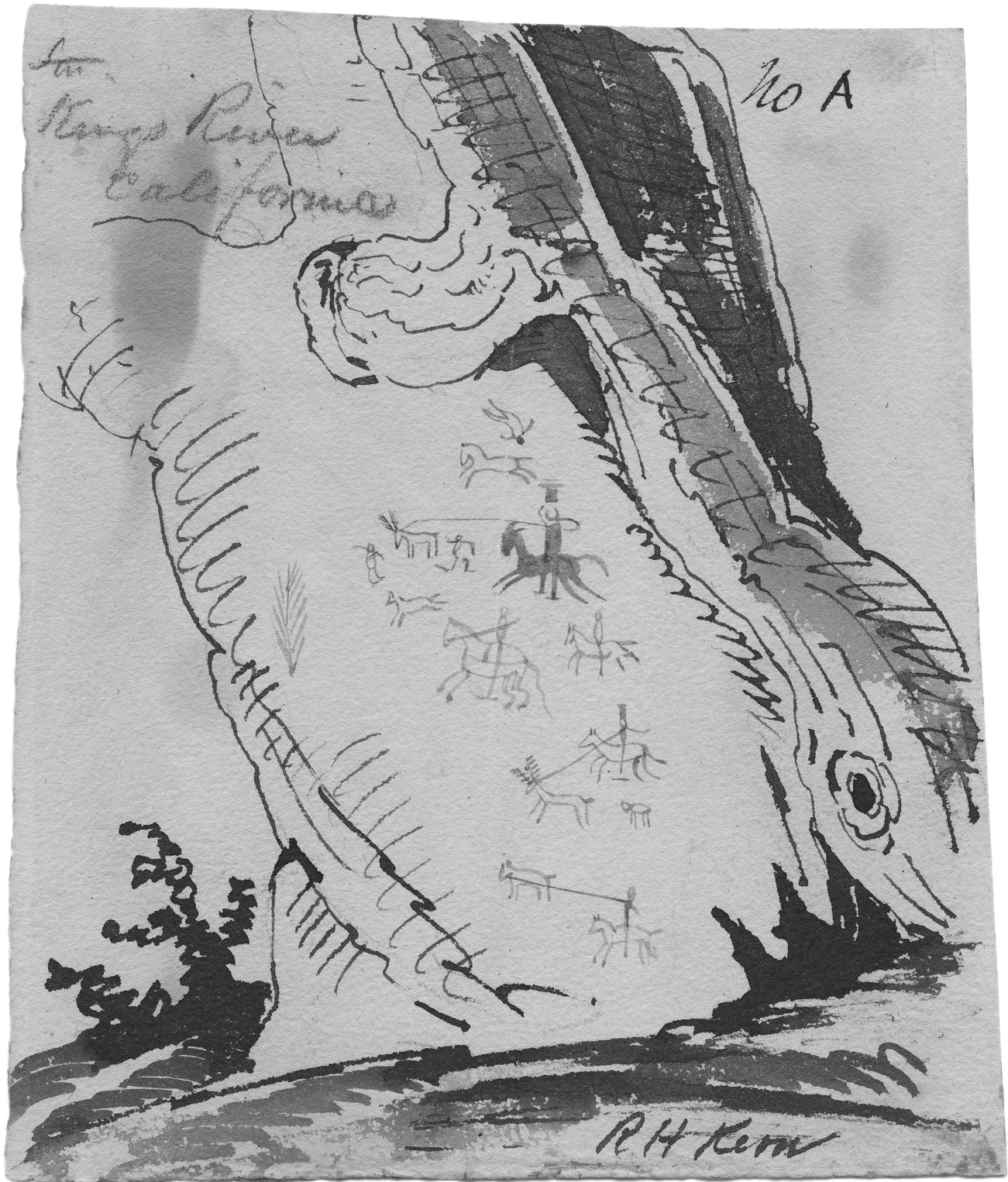


Figure 1. Richard Kern's 1853 copy of Edward Kern's 1846 sketch of arborgraph near Kern River. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM# 41-72-10/412.

This would also suggest that the figures in the arborgraph were probably drawn sometime well after the 1820s, since until then there had been relatively little contact between the mission communities and the adjacent *ranchos*, and native groups living in the Kern River area.

However, there is another possible interpretation of the arborgraph, and one that I believe is much more likely to be correct. In my opinion, too little consideration has been given in the past to the initial cultural responses of native peoples to their first encounter, not only with the Spanish, but with Spanish animals such as horses and other livestock. After all, Native Californians lived in a universe very different from our own, one in which many of the categories—and the boundaries between those categories—that we accept as natural and inevitable were far more fluid and permeable (Blackburn 1975). The world was a dangerous, unpredictable place where things were not necessarily what they superficially seemed to be, and the categories of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ were frequently interchangeable. Were-animals, shape-changers, and shamans with strange powers could easily be encountered anywhere one went.

Consider, for example, the suggestive implications of the following account. In 1919, Maria Solares told John Harrington (1986: Vol. 3, RI. 9, Fr. 432–40) that before Mission Santa Ynez was established in 1804, but after the founding of Mission Santa Barbara in 1786, some hunters from the village of Kalawašaq encountered an ox that had strayed away from somewhere over the mountains. They took it as a sign of ill omen and were very afraid. They had never seen anything like it, and they watched it day and night. Finally, the people decided to drive it to the village. They spread tule mats for the ox to stand on, and then showered it with offerings of feather down, beads of various kinds, and such foods as acorns, coffee berry, chia, tarweed seeds, pinyon nuts, and islay. Then they left it alone and just watched it some more. Eventually the ox wandered away without harming anyone. As this story (and many others) illustrates, it would have been customary for anyone approaching or interacting with a place or an entity thought to be imbued with power, such as a shrine or suspected supernatural beings, to make an offering of food items and shell beads as a kind of warding prayer.

How would native Californians have reacted to their first sight of *vaqueros* riding horses and roping

elk, grizzlies, and other large animals, and what kind of assumptions might they have made regarding the activities they were observing? Here were strange people interacting with and controlling not one but two different kinds of large, powerful, and (in the case of the horses) completely unknown creatures by what must have seemed supernatural means. Although it is pure speculation, could the *vaqueros*’ lariats have perhaps been viewed as being somehow analogous to the *takulšoxšinaš* or feathered cords described in Chumash narratives (Blackburn 1975) as being used by both mythic beings and by shamans?

In summary, I suggest that the Kern River arborgraph could be viewed as an initial attempt by native peoples to understand and deal with the incursion of new, powerful, and potentially dangerous entities into their world; they might well have believed that the act of depicting those unknown forces in the same way that others were traditionally portrayed might afford them a certain measure of control over them, or at least allow them to minimize or ameliorate their impact.

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