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# Some Observations on Chumash Prehistoric Stone Effigies

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**A**MONG the many items of material culture representative of the prehistoric cultures of coastal southern California, stone effigies have generated the greatest interest as *objets d'art* among both anthropologists and art collectors. These artifacts generally lack provenience data, and this has led to ambiguous functional interpretations (Greenwood 1962, 1965, 1967; Eisenbud 1964). Such objects are traditionally placed in the nebulous category of "ceremonial objects." The questionable authenticity of many specimens provides an additional complication to objective analysis. There has long been a need for a detailed description and comparison of all known specimens, many of which are now widely scattered throughout Europe and North America. Robert Wharton of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, and I have initiated such a project. As a preliminary step in this research I wish to present here some general observations that I have made or which are illustrated elsewhere in the literature on effigies from coastal southern California.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Stone effigies from southern California archaeological contexts have been reported since the latter half of the nineteenth century. The areal distribution of such specimens includes the region occupied by the historic Chumash and the island Shoshonean-

speakers—roughly the coastal ranges from Point Conception to Los Angeles and all of the Channel Islands. The earliest effigies to be collected in an archaeological context were excavated in 1877-79 by Léon de Cessac on San Nicholas Island and are now in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (de Cessac 1882; Hamy 1882; Reichlen and Heizer 1963). D. B. Rogers (1929:pl. 74b) excavated two effigies from the site of Mikiw (SBa-78) in 1925 which are now in the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. Effigies in the collections of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York, are illustrated in the most complete work on the subject (Burnett 1944), but many of the specimens lack provenience data. The Southwest Museum in Los Angeles houses a number of effigies derived from private donations and attributed to the Chumash (Anon. 1946, 1947; Bryan 1963:46-47). The Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, and the San Diego Museum of Man contain other unpublished specimens. The collections of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington contain effigies collected from the Santa Barbara Channel region by Paul Schumacher (1877), a contemporary of de Cessac. Two specimens in the State Indian Museum, Sacramento, are attributed to southern California, but provenience data are lacking (Heizer 1957). Two atypical effigies were recovered in an archaeological context from the Browne

Site (Ven-150) (Greenwood 1962, 1967), and generated a spirited discussion of their possible psychological implications (Eisenbud 1964; Greenwood 1965). While most documented effigies were recovered from Late Horizon sites, those from the Browne Site were clearly made within the time period usually assigned to the Early Horizon.

The majority of specimens are of carved steatite, presumably obtained from Santa Catalina Island. The black effigies may have been greased and smoked before being buffed to a high polish. Serpentine, siltstone, and certain volcanics were less commonly used materials.

### FORMS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFIGIES

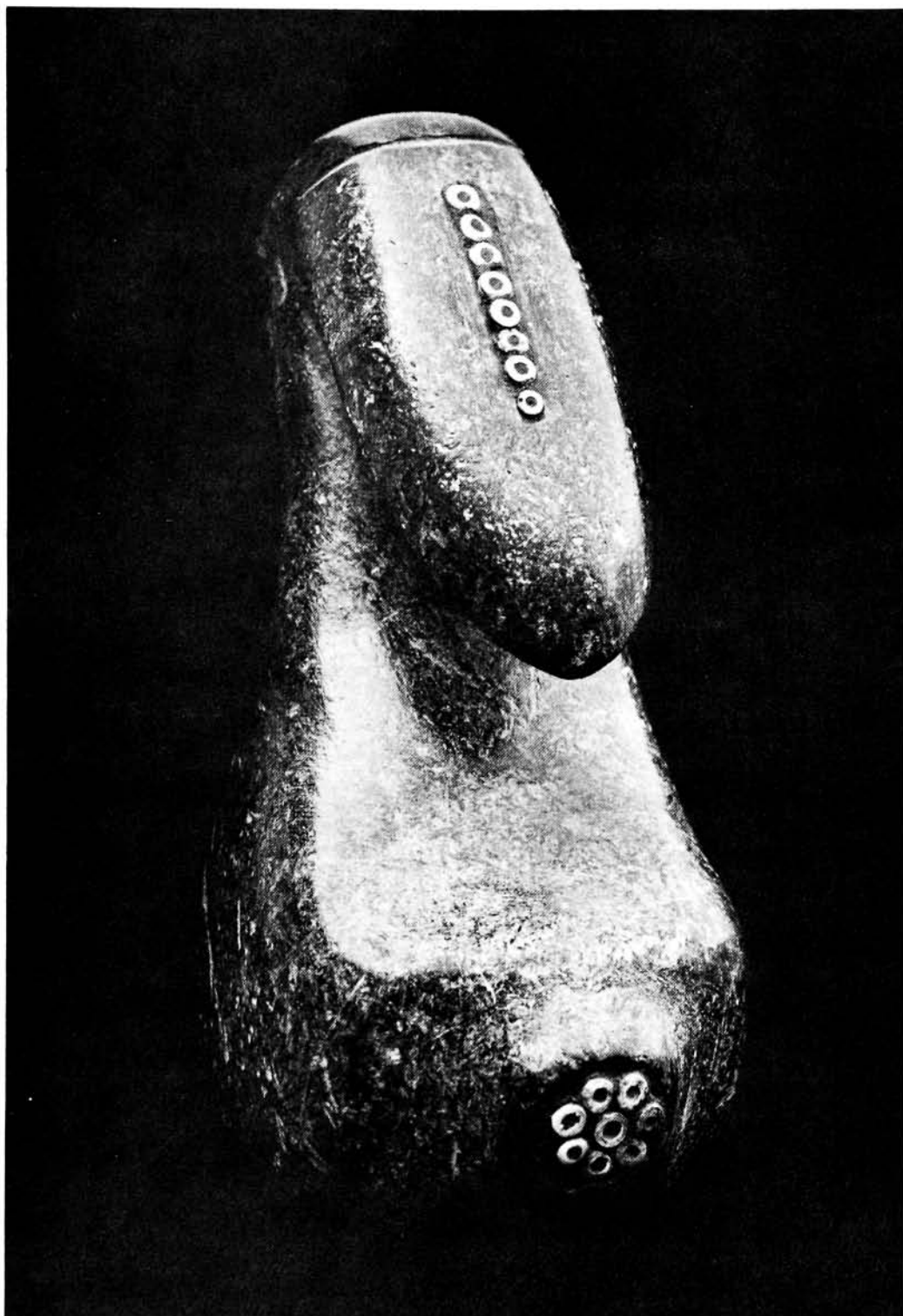
Zoomorphic representations of marine mammals and water birds comprise the largest category of prehistoric effigies. The killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) is the most common marine mammal and can be easily identified by its characteristic dorsal fin. According to information in the unpublished ethnographic notes of J. P. Harrington (n.d.) the killer whale was regarded by the Chumash as a benevolent creature which drove schools of porpoises and whales ashore where they could be utilized by man. Today, the killer whale remains the only cetacean that habitually preys upon warm-blooded animals (Daugherty 1965:32-35). Other cetaceans represented include the California gray whale (*Eschrichtius gibbosus*), the Pacific pilot whale (*Globicephala scammoni*), and the harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*). Pinniped species include the California sea lion (*Zalophus californianus*), and the harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*). Sharks and sailfish, featured in Chumash mythology, are also represented (Mohr and Sample 1955), as is the California sea otter (*Enhydra lutris*). Heizer (1957:10) notes the frequent tendency to combine attributes of several species in a single effigy.

The representation of avifauna in sculptured art is more problematical. Numerous examples of "pelican stones" or "hook" effigies exist in museum collections from southern California. Assuming that these objects were actually intended as representations of birds, one can identify particular species by the size and orientation of the beak. Water birds, such as the heron (*Ardea herodias*), loon (*Gavia* sp.), grebe (*Podiceps?* sp.), cormorant (*Phalacrocorax* sp.), and pelican (*Pelecanus* spp.) can be identified. One effigy from the Los Angeles County Museum represents a raven (*Corvus corax*), a bird with an important role in the mythology of the Chumash and their neighbors.

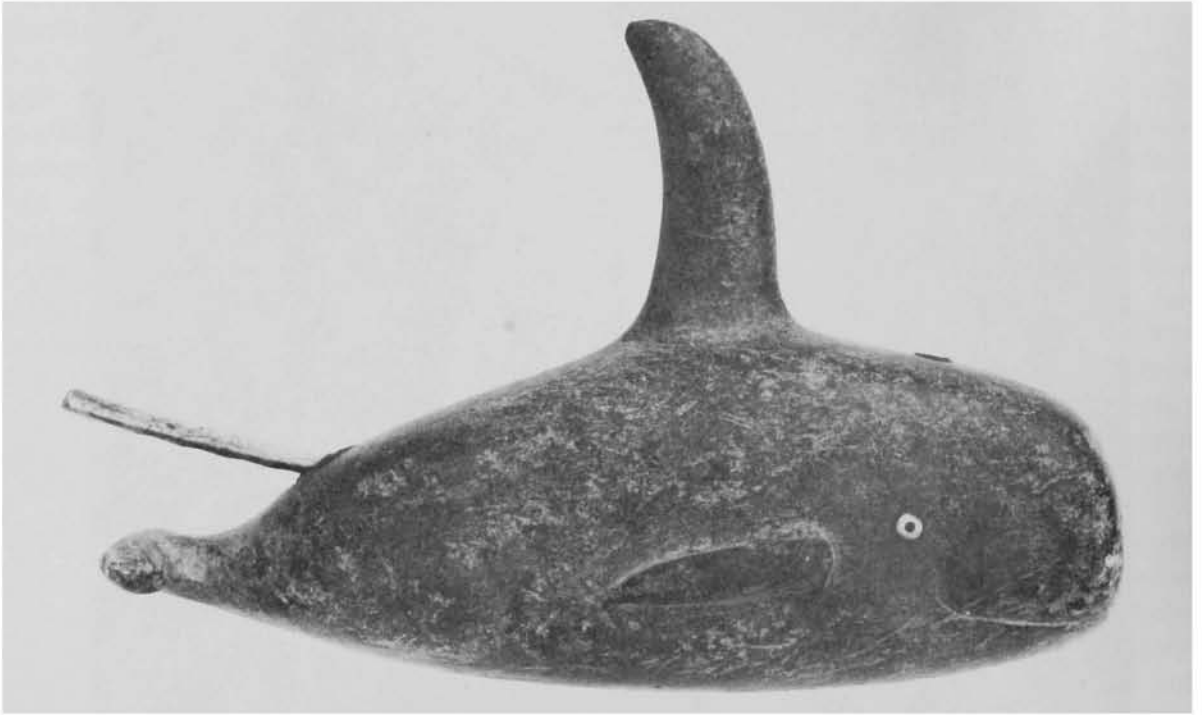
Several inanimate objects served as the subjects of effigy art. Steatite representations of canoes and unusual spike-shaped objects are the most common items in this category. The canoes often have the raised prow and stern of the southern California plank canoe described by the Spaniards. One specimen consists of a steatite carving of an oval basket. The Pomo used such baskets for storing ceremonial and medicinal objects, and they may well have served the same purpose in the Chumash area.

### STYLISTIC GROUPINGS

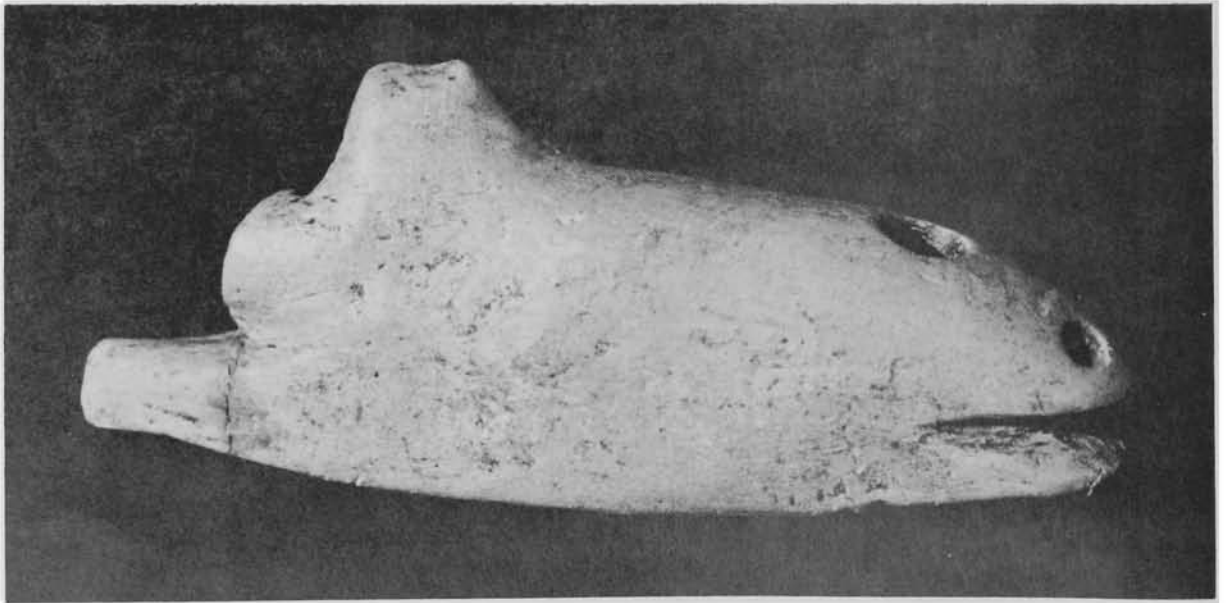
The zoomorphic effigies can be roughly grouped into realistic and abstract stylistic categories. The latter have been well-documented in archaeological contexts from both the mainland and the Channel Islands. The killer whale effigies recovered by de Cessac (1882:pl. la-g) from San Nicolas Island and those found by Rogers (1929:pl. 74b) at Mikiw on the Santa Barbara mainland are clearly of the same style. Drilled eyes and blowholes, mouth incisions, and roughly pyramidal dorsal fins characterize both groups of specimens. Pelican and spike effigies may also be classed as abstract representations in which only minimal recognizable features are por-



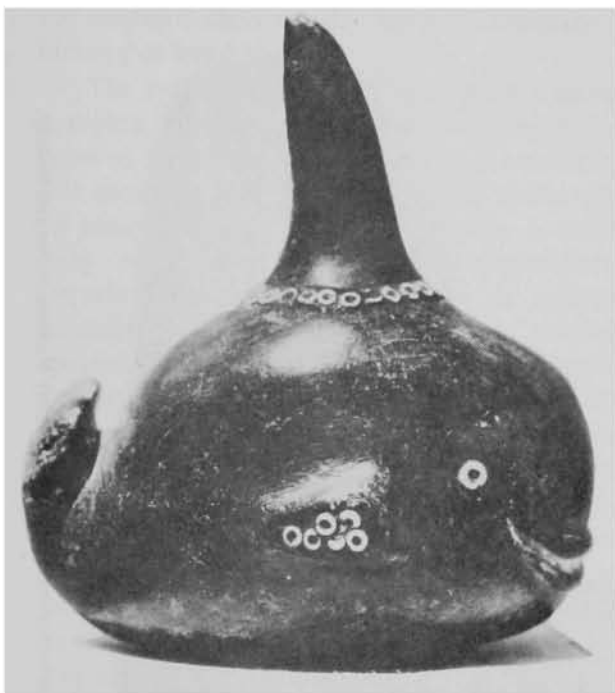
Steatite waterbird effigy with shell bead inlay from San Nicolas Island. Courtesy of Catalina Island Museum.



Steatite male killer whale effigy with shell bead inlay eyes and bird bone tube suggestive of pipe mouthpiece. Acquired through A. R. Sanger. Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.



Shale killer whale effigy with drilled eyes and blowhole. Excavated by D. B. Rogers at Mikiw (SBa-78), 1925. Courtesy of Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.



Steatite killer whale effigy with shell bead inlay from San Nicolas Island. Courtesy of the Catalina Island Museum.



Steatite domestic dog effigy with shell disc bead inlay eyes from San Nicolas Island. Courtesy of the Catalina Island Museum.

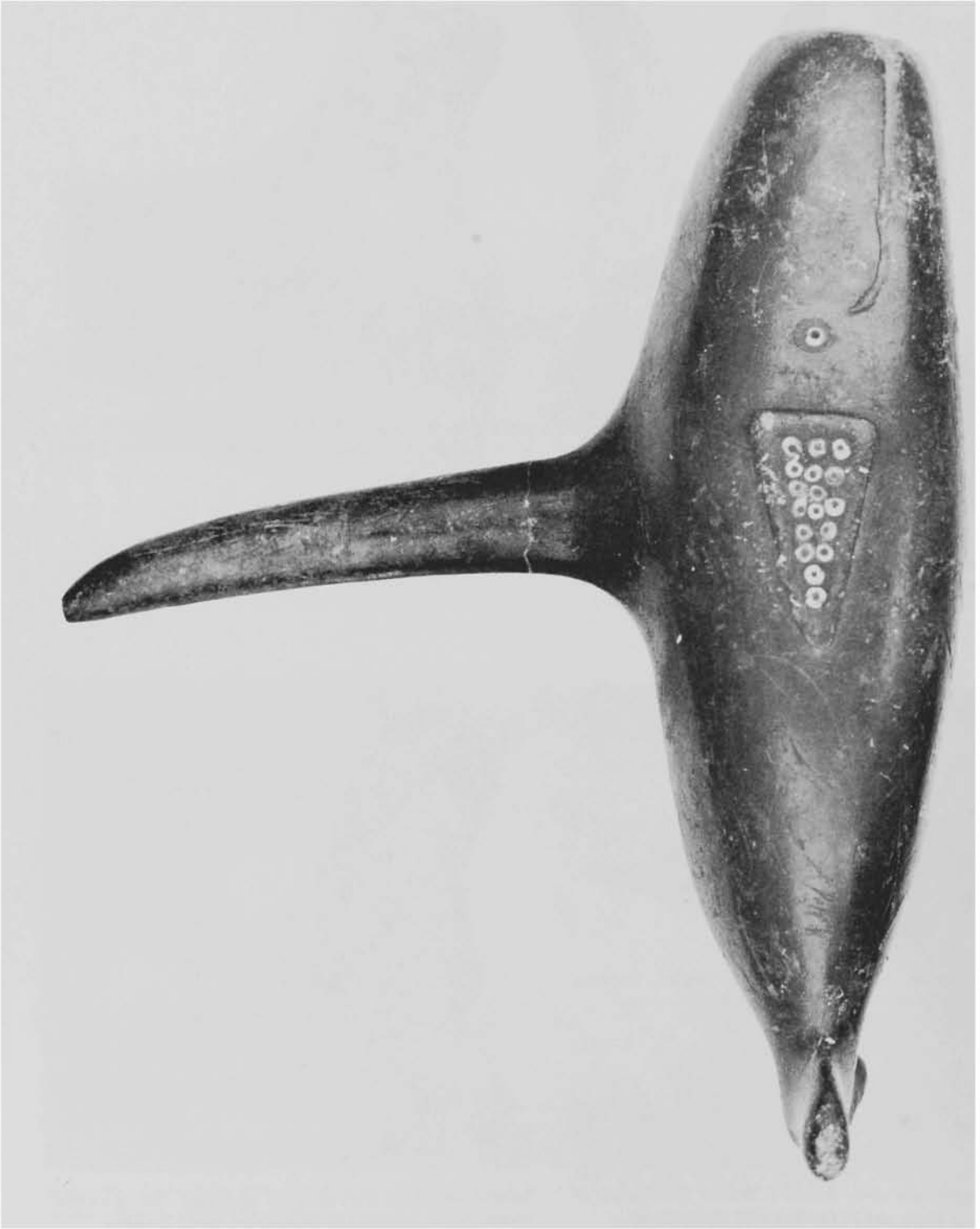


Steatite swordfish (?) effigy. Provenience lacking. Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.



Steatite seal effigy with shell disc bead inlay eyes from San Nicolas Island. Courtesy of the Catalina Island Museum.

Photographs on pages 36 (bottom), 37 (top left, top right, bottom right), and 38 by Robert L. Hoover. Photographs on pages 35, 36 (top), and 37 (bottom left) by Jon Bosak.



Steatite killer whale effigy with shell bead inlay. Provenience lacking. Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.

trayed (Greenwood 1962, 1967). Effigies of the abstract class usually have no decorative incising or bead inlay.

The realistic class of effigies poses a more complex problem. Some specimens were recovered from reliable archaeological contexts, but most are donations by private collectors to museums with no accompanying data or only weak areal and cultural attribution. Certain specimens may portray an animal unrealistically or as a composite of several species. One shark effigy in the Los Angeles County Museum was portrayed with two gill slits on either side. Actual living sharks have four to nine gill slits on a side. A very suspect effigy of a tarantula (*Eurthma californica*) has only six legs instead of eight. Such discrepancies may be explained as artistic license or as features which were considered unimportant to the native artist. However, prehistoric man was surely intimately familiar with the details of the animals about him, and such specimens might equally well be explained as careless attempts to exploit the antiquities market by modern artists who had less firsthand knowledge of the true appearance of the animals.

The question of authenticity arises again when examining the functions and construction of the effigies. A number of specimens are assumed to be pipes because of their hollow cylindrical form or because they are equipped with bird bone mouthpieces (Burnett 1944:21-35). However, one killer whale with a drilled blowhole and bird bone tube inserted in the posterior dorsal region has never been hollowed out and could not have been used as a pipe. Certain hollow cylindrical forms have such a fantastic morphology that they may not be authentic (e.g., Burnett 1944:pls. XVI-XXV, XXXII-XXXIV). Large inlaid eyes on the ends of prominent stalks, multiple dorsal fins, gaping circular mouths, lavish shell inlay in peripheral bands and on side fins, and whalebone handles are features of these effigies. I have not observed any of

these specimens with carbonized residue on the interior surface or any other signs which indicate use as pipes. Even more interesting is the fact that these fantastic specimens for which data are available were derived directly or indirectly from A. R. Sanger, a collector of the early twentieth century, who claimed that they came from Sequit Canyon on the Malibu Ranch. A further step in the study of these objects will be to observe the surfaces carefully under magnification for signs of metal file marks, modern glues, and artificially produced surface coloring.

Prehistoric effigies from coastal southern California portrayed objects that had ritual as well as economic significance for the Chumash and their neighbors. Within the vigorous artistic traditions of these people, a wide variety of items was represented in both abstract and realistic styles at least during the Late Horizon. Recent attempts to duplicate or improve on the original specimens only enhance the true artistry of the prehistoric population.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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