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The San Emigdio Rock Art Site

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THIS paper examines the possibility that at least portions of a particular Chumash rock painting site were executed in historic times and may have been painted in an effort to activate supernatural forces against the Spanish-Mexican intruders. It describes the specific magico-religious elements of the rock art as well as the area in question and explores the possibility that the missions may have been the source for the unusual colors found at this site. These colors, which are atypical for the Chumash, are green, blue-green, and a true orange.¹ All of these colors exhibit opacity to some degree.

Located in southwestern Kern County, California (Fig. 1), the San Emigdio site (CA-Ker-77) has been described by Campbell Grant (1978:534) as “. . . the finest example of prehistoric rock art in the United States.” In a tribal area known for its colorful and unique cave paintings, this Chumash rock art site is a truly outstanding one.

Ker-77 was first mentioned in Steward (1929:100) and was designated as his Site 88. Some of these pictographs from the main cave shelter have been illustrated by Grant (1965:Pl. 27, 28), but as of 1979 a complete recording of the site has not been made.

The Chumash Indians of southern California occupied the northern offshore islands (Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel) and a mainland area that extended south and inland from a point north of Cayucos to

Malibu. Compared to other tribes of California, the Chumash developed a rather complex culture and unique technological achievements such as the ocean-going plank canoe. The bulk of the population clustered along the coast, and it is the coastal area that has been the focus of a great deal of anthropological and archaeological study. The thinly-populated inland territory has, until recently, received scant attention. However, as a result of surveys and research into various ethnological records, there is growing evidence of an elaborate cultural complex among the inland Chumash as well. This leads us to the rock art sites which are evidence of inland Chumash ceremonial activity.

Although rock art is found virtually all over Chumash territory, with one exception (Painted Cave, San Marcos Pass) the most extensive and elaborate sites are located in the interior areas. One interior area noted for its pictographs and petroglyphs is cited by Horne (1979), who connects shamanistic activity—as reported in an ethnographic account—and rock art:

Hekep was situated in or near the rocks of the western end of Hurricane Deck near the Sisquoc River. Inhabitants were notorious for their sorcerer's ways. María Solares, an Ineseño [consultant], said “. . . the people of *Hekep* were very *malditos* [wicked], very much given to witchcraft . . . almost every person was an *hechicero* [shaman].” The abundance of rock art near *Hekep* is very likely a physi-

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cal trace of this efflorescence of shamanism. It may also be true that shamanism and traffic in mystical vision were the special province of *Hekep* and, perhaps, of the interior Chumash villages.

All rock art appears to be classifiable into several categories. Much of it may be described as a response to a crisis situation, created by shamans in an attempt to placate an inimical universe at those times when the tribe was faced with unexplained phenomena or seemingly uncontrollable events. An example is the apparent increase in ceremonial activity in the inland area after the arrival of the Spaniards when the people were deprived of their traditional ways and were dying of introduced diseases. The ceremonies, including the execution of rock art, were an effort to exercise supernatural power in order to avert death and to drive the Spaniards out of their area (Hudson and Underhay 1978:72).

We have some ethnographic evidence from the Chumash area concerning the potency of rock paintings: "... a wizard ... caused a great drought and famine This sorcerer had a tablet or stone on which he painted many figures He took this out into the hills and exposed it to the sun, and many people died of hunger" (Blackburn 1975:276). Hudson and Underhay (1978:36) also note that a method of avoiding a storm was to paint on a rock.

The Yokuts, who occupied the territory to the east and north of the Chumash, considered rock paintings to have supernatural power (Latta 1949:180), and Yokuts shamans painted "spirits" that they had seen in dreams (Driver 1937:126). Another nearby tribal group, the Kawaiisu, believed that rock painting was done by the Rock Baby who dwelt in the rocks and the sites with paintings were not supposed to be visited by the people, who believed that to touch one would cause a disaster (Zigmond



Fig. 1. Territory of the Chumash with localities discussed in the text.

1977:71). Perhaps this explains the attitude of the Chumash toward Painted Cave near Santa Barbara. An early ethnographic account states that they feared and avoided it (Ritter and Ritter 1976:211).

Thus, during a crucial period, pictographs would be painted on cave walls. A hallucinogenic drug, *Datura*, was taken in order to see the present more clearly, as well as to see events in the future. Live ants were swallowed to obtain supernatural power (Blackburn 1976:80), and ritual paraphernalia were necessary to help achieve control over natural or man-made crises.

By 1824, man-made crises made life unbearable for the Chumash, and they revolted. Numerous factors led to the rebellion. Among these were a complete break-down of the old ways and customs, forced labor, hunger, and diseases which decimated the population. The revolt started at Santa Inés Mission when the Indians felt one of their number had been unjustly flogged; the mission was surrounded and set on fire. The news reached La Purísima Mission the same day, and the neophytes there succeeded in capturing that mission. When Santa Barbara Mission got word of the rebellion, the Chumash women and children fled for the mountains; 200 fighting Chumash men stayed behind. After a three-hour battle, the Indians sacked the mission of supplies and followed the women and children into the inland area (Stickel and Cooper 1969:15). In addition, approximately 50 Indians fled to Santa Cruz by canoe. Mexican troops mounted two expeditions in an effort to return the Indians by force; the second attempt, which was armed with cannons and included a total of 113 men, succeeded in overtaking the Chumash at San Emigdio and returning those who were captured.

Not all the Chumash that fled were returned. Many undoubtedly slipped away, either remaining in the area or joining with

other groups. They also may have joined neophytes who had previously deserted, as a gradual inland movement to get away from the Spanish influence had been going on for some time (Hudson and Underhay 1978:72). It is interesting that, of all the places they could have chosen, many of the refugees picked the Mount Piños area. This suggests that the area was recognized as a ritual center and a place of supernatural power. The inland mountains were both well-known and sacred to the Chumash, but they were rugged and relatively inaccessible to the Spanish-Mexican authorities. High mountains were considered to be places of special power, and Mount Piños, called '*Iwihinmu*, was one of the most sacred peaks, for it was located near the center of the Chumash universe. The San Emigdio site is situated a short distance north of both Mount Piños and the valley that constituted the actual center, or focus, of this universe. This valley, called '*Antap* (Cuddy Valley), was feared and respected for its supernatural power. It is, incidentally, directly bisected by the infamous San Andreas earthquake fault, whose frequent earth tremors undoubtedly contributed to its mystique. This, then, was the place where many of the Chumash took refuge after the revolt of 1824.

The rock art site is adjacent to a creek, situated amongst oaks in a grassland area, and consists of cave shelters. Four of these cave shelters have paintings. Bedrock mortars and cupules are associated with the shelters with an occupation site a short distance upstream.

Of the four cave shelters with paintings, the largest is the most spectacular. The cave opening faces east and has a commanding view of the area. The paintings were more extensive at one time; traces of designs indicate that the entire ceiling and nearly all the walls of the cave were decorated. Today, parts of the north wall and some parts of the ceiling exhibit pictographs, but these too are endangered by

exfoliation of the rock surface. There is no evidence of vandalism.

The pictographs are stunning examples of design and craftsmanship. One panel (Fig. 2) on the north face of the cave, is dominated by

a large circular motif with concentric rings and dentates. The colors are red, blue-green, yellow, black, and white. Small white dots act as fillers on the black areas. Below this is a bizarre, vertically-oriented design in blue-

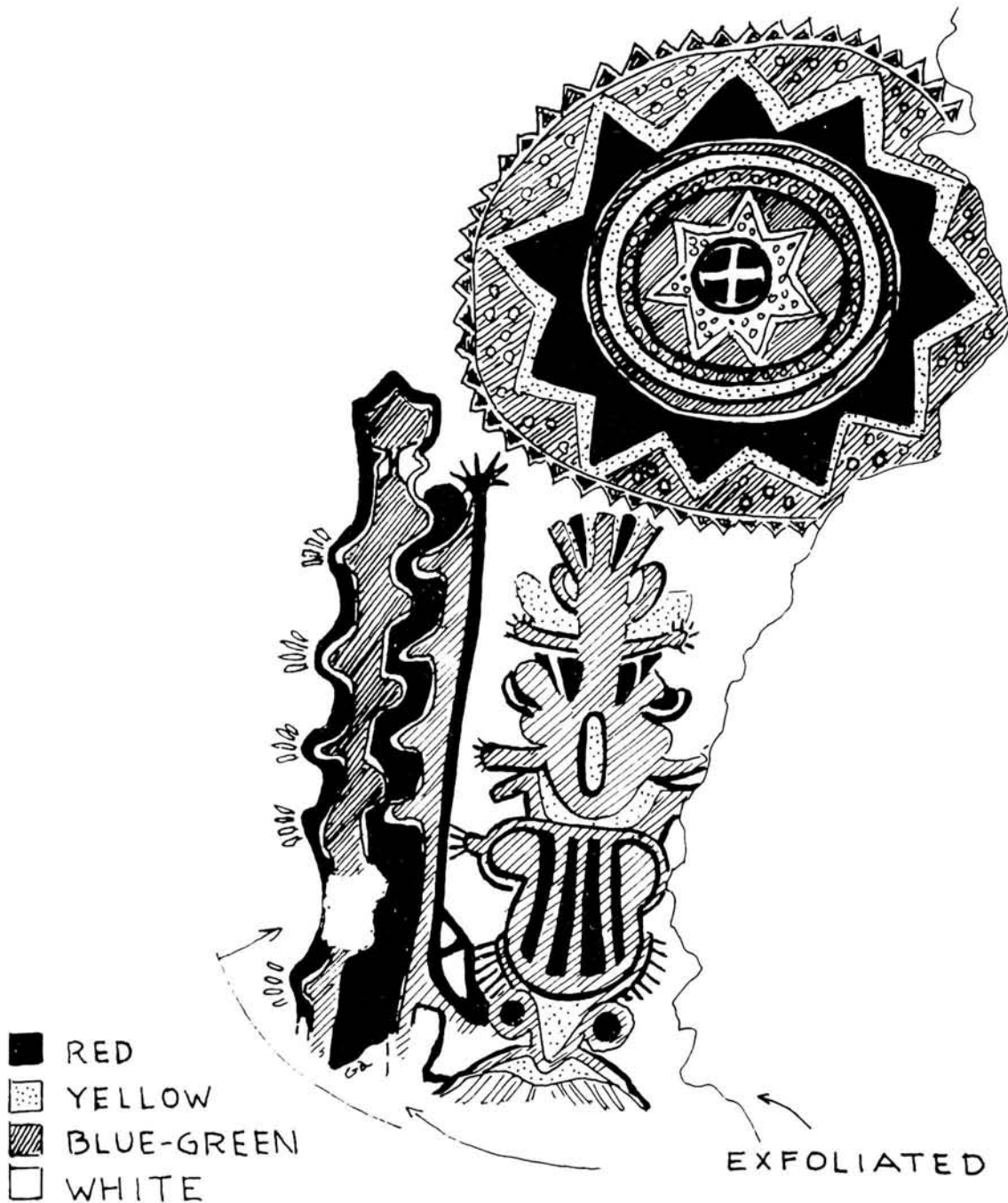


Fig. 2. Located on the north side of the large cave shelter, this circular motif has concentric rings, dots, and dentates. The figure below may represent some sort of creature. Colors are red, blue-green, yellow, white, and black.

green, yellow, red, and white. It may represent some sort of creature. To the left is another vertical motif in red, white, and blue-grey which slightly overlaps another circular element made up of red and white concentric rings. This latter element is also overlapped by two other designs. More figures are below and to the left, most of them very faint; several bug-like creatures can be seen, as well as a blue-grey snake outlined in red with white dots. The body of the snake has cross-hatched red lines which form diamond shapes; four of these are solidly painted with yellow.

The other remaining panel is located on the ceiling of the cave. Here is another large and elaborate circular element with dentates and concentric rings; it is painted in green, yellow, red, black, and white. An ornate zig-zag adjoins this element, as does a motif with bifurcated ends. The design elements toward the edge of the cave opening, with two exceptions, defy description. The over-all designs (Fig. 3) do not relate to anything in my experience, with the exception of an anthropomorphic figure in black with red and white outline and a zoomorph which has a red and yellow outline around a green body filled in with white and red dots. The colors are yellow, green, blue-green, red, black, and white.

Many features of these paintings are typically Chumash, such as minute attention to detail; bilateral symmetry; certain recurring symbols; and technique of painting (use of dots, outlining, etc.); superimposition can be seen in several areas where intricate pictographs were painted over simpler designs. Some of the typical design elements are circular discs containing sunburst-type motifs, bug-like creatures, zigzags, bisected chevrons or plant forms, pinwheels, etc. It has been suggested by Hudson and Underhay (1978:118-119) that the two most elaborate circular motifs in this cave may be Upper World depictions representing the sun, stars, and the Milky Way.

Slightly south and downhill from the main shelter are two small cavities with very interesting small-scale designs painted in white. It should be noted that color was symbolic² for the Chumash, white being associated with stars and possibly some planets (Hudson and Underhay:146). The main design in one panel (Fig. 4) appears to be a flight, or a path; two pinwheels are painted near it. These may refer to the path of the souls of the dead, for it was believed that souls travelled through the air toward the west. When people saw the soul ". . . it shone like a light, and it left a . . . trail behind it. The disease from which the person had died was seen as a fiery ball at its side" (Blackburn 1975:99).

The fourth cave is 100 yards south of the large main shelter. Instead of a cave high on the hillside, this site is a free-standing boulder on the terrace near the creek. Although smaller and less spectacular, this cave is in many ways more interesting. The floor of the cave is covered with midden, and numerous cupules run in horizontal rows from below the present ground level to halfway up the walls. Cupules are in the cave, continue over the top of the cave opening, and around the outside of the boulder in a line. Behind and uphill to the west of this boulder are rocks with more cupules plus bedrock mortars.

The cave contains several small painted panels which are divided by exfoliated sections especially in the center where wind erosion has scoured away the surface. The panel to the left of the cave entrance is blackened and begins approximately half-way up the wall. Painted on the black surface are designs in yellow, cream, and two shades of red. Underneath the paintings are cupules and vertical grooves; the cupules are a continuation from the floor of the cave. The painted designs are faint and difficult to make out, but one anthropomorphic figure with a large circular head can be seen. To the right of the cave entrance are three separate panels. The inner-

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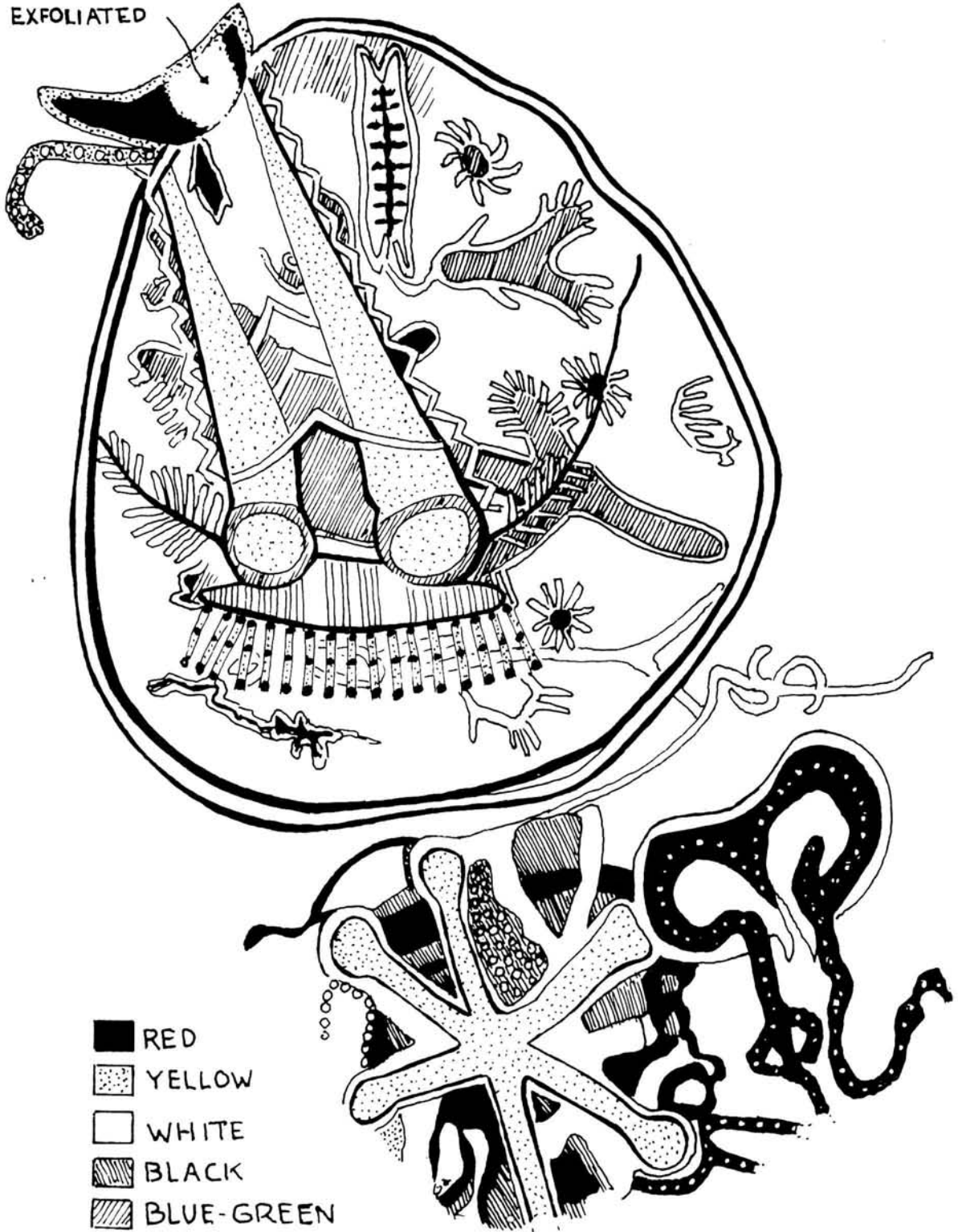


Fig. 3. A portion of the panel located on the ceiling of the cave shelter. Colors are red, yellow, white, black, and blue-green. Although individual elements such as zigzags, chevrons, pinwheels, etc., can be isolated, the design—taken as a whole—defies interpretation.

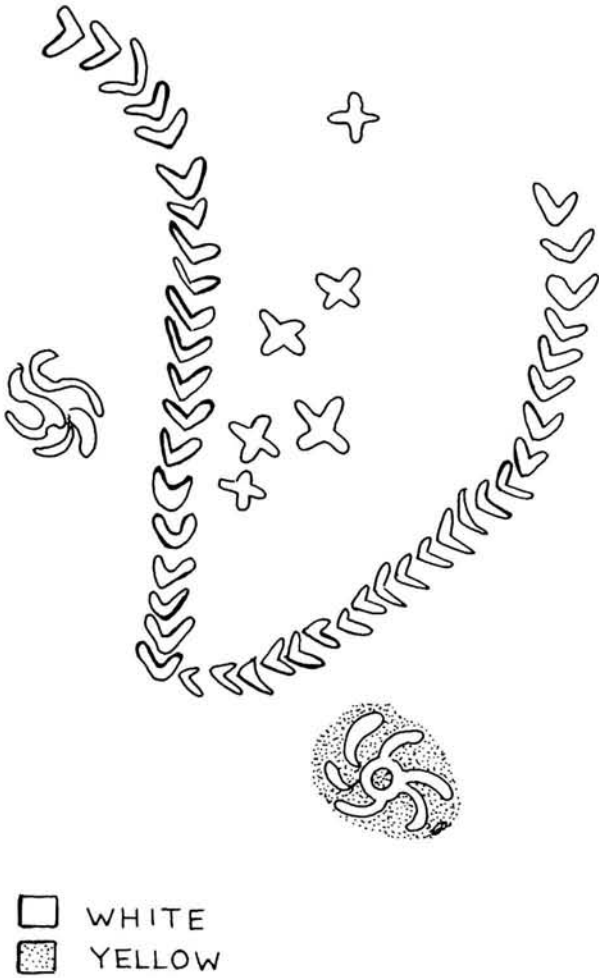


Fig. 4. This small design in white and yellow is located in a cavity below the main shelter. The motif may refer to the path of the souls of the dead.

most panel is severely eroded; it displays a combination of zoomorphic creatures in typical Chumash style, plus a vertical grouping of bird tracks painted in orange with black claws. This true, vivid orange is one of the colors not previously observed in this area. Other colors are yellow, black, white, and several shades of red. Although fragmentary, the next panel is the best preserved. It consists of a delightful assortment of creatures and designs painted with meticulous attention to detail. Several anthropomorphic figures appear to be holding disc-like objects on their heads. A yellow circular motif has extended zigzag rays, and one

figure appears to represent either a mythological character or a shaman wearing a ritual costume (Fig. 5). The headdress resembles a long beak or swordfish bill. Tiny dots accentuate the design, and the figure appears to be garbed in a fringed or feathered costume. In Chumash mythology, *Holhol* was Condor or condor-impersonator, and he is described as human in form with a costume of feathers which cover him from head to foot. *Holhol's* sacred clothing and ritual paraphernalia

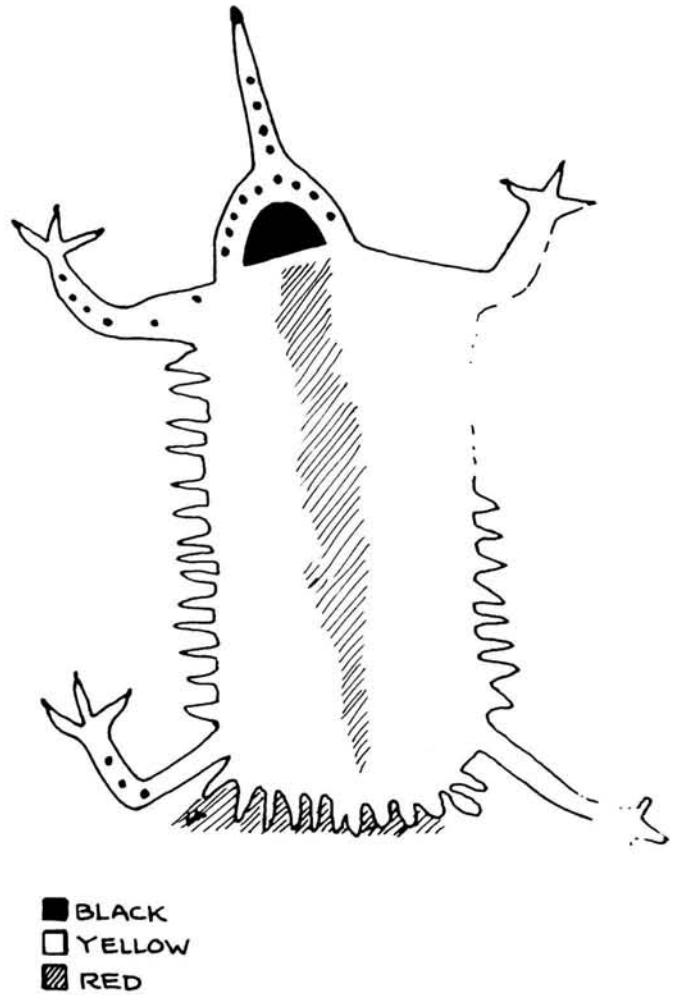


Fig. 5. A meticulously painted figure which appears to be wearing a headdress. This design is part of a larger panel from the cave shelter 100 yds. south of the main shelter. Colors are yellow, black, and red.

enabled him to travel rapidly over great distances and locate missing persons (Hudson and Underhay 1978:91-92). Perhaps this is a painting of that mythological creature, or the elongated headpiece may represent a Swordfish Dancer. The Chumash considered Swordfish to be the chief of all the other fish, and to be endowed with supernatural power (Hudson and Blackburn 1978:237). If, indeed, this might represent a Swordfish Dancer, it suggests a strong influence from the coastal Chumash. Above this grouping is a rare depiction of an anthropomorphic figure in red which has a rayed headdress tipped with a second color, black. The colors in this panel include several shades of red, two shades of yellow, black, and white. The panel at the edge of the cave opening consists of a simple petroglyph which forms an inverted V, plus a vertical groove. The blackened surface covers the petroglyph. Over the cave entrance is a small panel painted in red and white on black; these designs are vertical zigzags. None of the panels is complete. Exfoliation, fading, and erosion have been severe. Like the large cave shelter, these paintings were much more extensive at one time, probably covering the entire alcove. The rock art at these shelters displays more colors and is more complex than at any other Chumash site.

The limited references to Chumash rock art have already been cited, and these refer exclusively to paintings and give no information about cupules. In other areas of California it has been suggested that cupules were associated with fertility, weather control, boundary markers, or puberty rites. Lacking ethnographic material, we simply cannot say what the cupules could have meant to the people who made them other than to note that they undoubtedly were important ritually. Cupules are found all over the Chumash area, sometimes in association with grooves, and frequently in association with pictograph and bedrock mortar sites. The cupules can be

randomly placed, or they can form patterns as they do at San Emigdio. At only one other site have we found cupules which form a link by connecting an interior pattern to the exterior surface of the rock. All these components suggest that this was a very sacred ritual site because of the many colors and unique designs, especially in proximity to Mount Piños.

Let us return to the pictographs. We must consider the unique colors of paint which are found here, and particularly the unusual opaque quality of these colors. Chumash pictographs, in general, exhibit varying degrees of transparency, whereas the colors at San Emigdio display a knowledge and skill in paint-mixing not yet found at other pictograph sites. Blue is the first atypical color. Three sites in Chumash territory with blue or blue-green paintings have been reported by Grant (1965:85); one is the site under discussion. One is a small pictograph near San Marcos Pass which Campbell Grant (personal communication 1979) believes to be historic, and the remaining pictograph is on the Sierra Madre Ridge (SBa-501). A recent examination of the latter painting reveals that the blue may be a faded black. When the blue is dampened with a fine spray of water it turns black.³ This is not the case for the blue and blue-green paintings at the San Emigdio site. It has been suggested that blue-green was probably obtained from locally available serpentine. My personal experiments to date with serpentine have only succeeded in obtaining a grayish-white color. However, fuchsite, a form of muscovite, which has been found in some Chumash graves from the Proto-historic Period (King 1969:37), produces a blue-green. This mineral may be a possible source of some blue-green paint.

The early explorers reported that the Chumash made lavish use of red, black, and white paint. This is consistent with what has been found archaeologically and ethnographically; these three basic colors were used all over California. Two of the early visitors also

noted some blue. Vizcaíno saw natives on the "south coast" who were painted a silver-blue, and Fages (Priestly 1937:34) described Indians as grinding red, white, and blue paint clays.⁴ Sherwin (1963:88) suggests that blue paint used by the Salinan Indians may have been made of hydrous oxide of manganese; Grant (1965:85) states that this was one of the sources of black pigment.

Another unique color at this site is a clear green. There is one known site in Tübatulabal territory some 60 miles to the east of the San Emigdio which displays some green pigment. This green is, however, a Terre Verde shade—a deep earthy green.

The orange color is sufficiently atypical to be given special consideration. It appears to me that it was mixed with a white substance which made it light reflective and therefore more vivid. To my knowledge no other Chumash site has this color.

We can assume that some pigments were brought into the Chumash area. Paint was an extremely valuable trade item as it was difficult to find and arduous to prepare. In some accounts, pigment was traded from tribe to tribe over long distances. After the arrival of the Spaniards, paint may also have been obtained at the missions. If these colors arrived from the east, one would expect more examples of their use in rock art, as well as for body paint. However, we have mission records which show requests (and receipts) for malachite and azurite to be sent from Mexico for pigments to decorate the missions (Webb 1952:233). The padres were known to select certain Indian neophytes to paint mission walls, murals, and designs (Phillips 1976:97); they would thus have been familiar with the paint, and also would have been instructed in the art of mixing certain pigments in order to obtain particular colors. The colors under question at the San Emigdio site have a special opaque quality not found at other Chumash sites. Since in the mission "instruc-

tion" for painters, gypsum⁵ or lime was mixed with the powdered pigment (Hageman 1939: 165-166) resulting in a characteristic opacity, those trained at the missions certainly knew how to extend the color range of pigments; the knowledge may also have been known earlier, but it appears not to have been utilized in the Chumash culture area.

I suggest that some of the pigments were obtained when the mission supplies were sacked at the time of the 1824 rebellion, and subsequently were used at San Emigdio in an effort to transfer power, as in an act of sympathetic magic. Perhaps these carefully executed designs were intended to activate supernatural forces against the intruders who had deprived them of their lands, virtually destroyed their culture, and now were angrily pursuing them. A problem with this postulation is the absence of any Christian motifs; however, since these painters were rebelling against the missions and Christian doctrine, the absence of the intruder's symbols was probably intentional. The use of the conqueror's pigment may well have been intended to give new power to design elements of the old cosmic themes.

The time is at hand to resolve the interesting and important riddle of this rock art. It is possible to subject a sample of the paint to X-ray diffraction and other analyses to identify its ingredients. To date, no paint fragments have been found on the cave floor and as I, for one, am loath to disturb these irreplaceable examples of Chumash painting it is difficult to decide how we should proceed. Suggestions are solicited. But, regardless of the reasons for their execution or their chemical makeup, the spectacular paintings at San Emigdio can be enjoyed on their own terms as elegant, sophisticated works of art and also as powerful—and poignant—supplications to the gods.

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NOTES

1. The opaque orange referred to is the color of an orange, as opposed to the usual faded red, or red-orange, paintings which have an entirely different appearance.

2. Red was associated with fire and earth; blue or black with rain (Hudson and Underhay 1978: 45).

3. James (1905:333) notes that colors used in the interior decoration of the missions were believed to have been of vegetable origin, blue being obtained from nightshade. Most other sources (see Webb 1952) describe the mission pigments as being derived from minerals. It is possible that both were used.

4. Another early account (Hageman and Ewing 1980:217) states: "The Indians ground a deposit known as 'chert' to obtain a great range of colors from green to blue." This is almost certainly a misunderstanding; chert is a highly unlikely candidate for pigment.

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