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An Unusual Stone Effigy from San Clemente Island, California

TRAVIS HUDSON

Sculptured in the round, the unusual stone object pictured here (Fig. 1) was recovered some ten years ago on San Clemente Island. The finder, Mr. Michael Hammer, discovered it on the surface near a small cave, high above Seal Cove, along the west coast of

the island. No less than ten small shell middens are known along the tops of the cliffs on the seaward edge of Seal Cove (McKusick and Warren 1959:122), but unfortunately the effigy was not directly associated with any archaeological midden in the area. Mr. Hammer noted, however, that midden debris was nearby. The specimen has been kindly loaned to the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History by Mr. Hammer for the description presented here.

The effigy is made from a dark gray and highly porous vesicular basalt, a substance which is indigenous to the island (Emory 1954:107). In maximum dimensions it measures 20.5 cm. high, 14.8 cm. wide, and 10.5 cm. thick. Aside from the original shaping by pecking and polishing, there are no other marks or alterations of recent date; the object is thus in good condition.

It is quite obvious that the effigy is representational of some form of animal, and thus it was subjected to identification by ornithologists and terrestrial and marine zoologists at the museum. Initially it was felt by Mr. Hammer that some sort of sea turtle was represented, but our marine zoologist (Dr. Charles Woodhouse) eliminated this possibility by comparisons to known sea turtles of southern California: if such an animal is figured, then the head has been rotated 180° and the facial features greatly distorted. Examination by other zoologists (Waldo Abbott, Paul Collins, Janet Hamber, and John Stohrer) at the museum suggests that the body form and facial features more closely correspond with that of a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia hypogaea*). This small (under 28 cm. tall), brown bird is characterized by a round head, stubby tail, and long legs. In behavior, it is diurnal (daylight), with a southern California distribution which extends from the coast to the base of the mountains, as well as on the larger offshore islands where it is a common resident (Willett 1912:53; Peterson 1961:162).

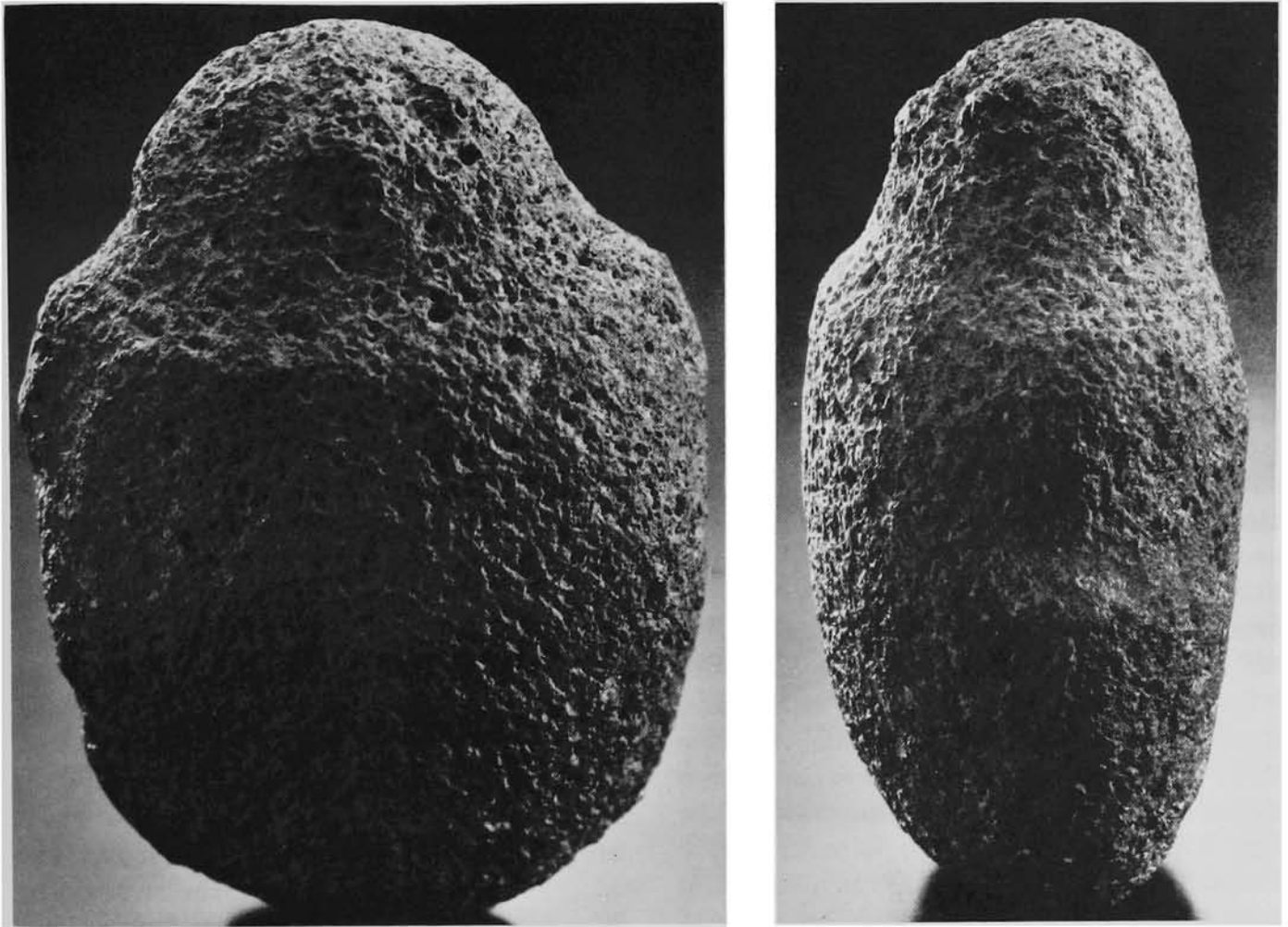


Fig. 1. Ventral and left lateral views of possible Burrowing Owl effigy from San Clemente Island. Photograph by Pat Wallace, Brooks Institute.

Jones (1975:23, 26, 139, Table 6) recorded observations of these owls on San Clemente Island, but noted that these birds were either migratory visitors or permanent residents. Burrowing Owls have been seen on the island during the breeding season, but unfortunately there are no substantiated nesting records.

Assuming the object represents this San Clemente Island bird facilitates the description which follows. As can be seen in the ventral view shown in Fig. 1, the head is small, rounded, and measures 8.1 cm. wide by 7.5 cm. high. It is separated from the body by a groove 3.0 cm. wide and 2.0 cm. deep which circumscribes the figure, thus forming the neck and shoulders, and emphasizing the head by its smooth curvature transitioning from convex

to concave surfaces. Facial features consists of two eye elements, somewhat though crudely rounded, and a triangular element centered and below the eyes which appears to be the owl's bill. The eyes are about 1.0 cm. in diameter, while the bill is 2.0 cm. wide at the top and 1.7 cm. in length. All of these features project some 2.0 cm. from the surface. These projections are perhaps more evident in the lateral view shown in Fig. 1.

The body itself is only slightly rounded on the dorsal side, but is highly so on the ventral side, perhaps emphasizing the bird's pronounced breast. At what would be the shoulder is a knob or stub, which no doubt represents the bend of the wing (distal end of the radius and ulna with the proximal end of the meta-

carpals), which on the Burrowing Owl obscures the bird's shoulder when the wing is rested against the body. These knobs measure about 3.2 cm. in length and width and form a somewhat square-shaped projection from the body which has slightly rounded corners. This feature is more evident on the right lateral rather than the left lateral (Fig. 1) side of the figure.

While the facial and body characteristics of the object suggest a Burrowing Owl, a short, stubby, bird-like tail is also present. This feature, as with the head, has also been emphasized by a shallow groove pecked into the stone. This groove measures 1.1 cm. in width and 0.5 mm. in depth, and it occurs only on the dorsal side. The ventral side exhibits only the crescentic shape of a slightly curving bird's tail, measuring 7.1 cm. in maximum width and 2.0 cm. in maximum length. The ventral and dorsal curvatures of the "tail" blend in with the body curvature. The lateral views exhibit the dorsal curve of the body extending down to the tip of the "tail," at which point the curve becomes reflective or concave (as it would be with a bird) before transitioning into the body again. Legs are not depicted. In short, these several facial, body, and "tail" characteristics of the Hammer effigy closely resemble those of a Burrowing Owl.

Stone effigies of one sort or another have been known for over a century in the archeological record of coastal mainland and island southern California, and thanks to Robert Hoover and Georgia Lee, a brief survey of their vast and unpublished data on these finds can be made in regard to the Hammer effigy. Hoover (1974:34) noted that most southern California effigies are suspected as dating from the Late Horizon (last 2,000 years), although two atypical, aquatic-like figures made from diorite have been recovered from a Ventura County site and are believed to be considerably older (Greenwood 1962, 1967). There is thus a reasonable, though unfounded, possibility that

the Hammer effigy dates to the Late Horizon.

The Hoover-Lee effigy notes reveal two interesting characteristics about these objects which indicate the Hammer find is unique. The first of these is the apparent rarity of of basaltic effigies from southern California. Their notes record that a spindle-like object (Los Angeles County Museum No. A-4431-468) made from a "lava" was recovered from a coastal site in Santa Barbara County, and that a "pelican stone" effigy (Lowie Museum No. 1-15144), made from a volcanic or volcanic-like rock, was recovered from Santa Catalina Island.

The second unique feature of the Hammer effigy concerns its representation. Hoover (1974:34-35) noted that marine animals and water birds ("pelican stones" for example) are by far more common subjects than terrestrial animals and birds. His conclusion is supported for San Clemente Island in particular. McKusick and Warren (1959:145) reported, for example, finding a small steatite whale effigy on the island, while the Hoover-Lee records indicate Schumacher, the investigator who reported finding many serpentine effigies of marine mammals and water birds on San Nicolas Island (Schumacher 1877:47), also recovered objects from San Clemente Island, specifically a steatite whale (?) effigy and two anomalous forms of serpentine and steatite (Peabody Museum, Harvard, Nos. 13.500, 13.502, and 13.503, the latter illustrated by Abbott 1879:216, Fig. 97). Two other anomalous objects of steatite (Peabody Museum, Harvard, No. 94392 and Lowie Museum No. 1-8455) are known to have been found on the island, along with four steatite "pelican stones" (Lowie Museum Nos. 1-8447, 1-8448, 1-8449, and 1-8451). Obviously from this survey of the published and unpublished literature on San Clemente Island effigies, the Hammer find is unique not only in the material from which it was made, but also in the subject it may depict.

The most puzzling aspect of the Hammer

effigy is not so much the material or location from which it comes, but rather why an owl was depicted. Among California's Yokuts, who occupied the San Joaquin Valley, the Burrowing Owl was considered a curing doctor or shaman's helper. There is one Yokuts myth in which Owl doctors Falcon after he was killed in battle (Gayton and Newman 1940:80), while another Yokuts informant stated that *Weti'ti* (Ground Owl or Pygmy Owl) was the first doctor and dream helper. His powers could be acquired by anyone, and skirts and headdresses were made from his feathers for ceremonial use (Gayton 1948:28, 32, 69). Closer to southern California, the Juaneño and Luiseño also considered *Kukuul* (Burrowing Owl) a curing doctor. The bird is mentioned ceremonially in songs, and he is described in myths as the supernatural who detected the bewitching of *Wiyot* and may have taken part, along with Tarantula, in doctoring him (Boscana 1933:32; Harrington 1933:112, note 29, and 151, note 78). It is very probable that these beliefs focused upon *Wiyot* were also shared, if not originating from, the Gabrielino and Fernandino of Los Angeles County. One of the San Fernando Mission Indian "gods" recorded by a priest is phonetically spelled *Veat* (Geiger and Meighan 1976:58, 158; Kroeber 1908:14), a most logical Spanish phonetic transcription for English *Wiyot* (Thomas Blackburn, personal communication, 1978). Given the linguistic evidence that San Clemente Island was tied into Shoshonean California—populated by peoples speaking a dialect of Gabrielino, Fernandino, or possibly Luiseño (Kroeber 1925:621, 649; Hudson 1978:27)—it seems reasonable to infer that the widespread concepts of Burrowing Owl as a curing doctor may have been equally believed by the San Clemente Islanders. In addition, there is also reason to believe that the mainlanders considered these islanders to not only have powerful doctors, but ones whose reputation was highly regarded, as the following unpub-

lished ethnographic fieldnote from a Tejon Kitanemuk informant of John P. Harrington's implies:

I asked Magd. [Magdalena Olivas] about the word *pipimar* and Magd. says it is the name of the island [of] Santa Catarina [Catalina]. Would call the town which is there now (means Avalon) *pipimarpe*. Magd. has heard that there is another island in the sea down near San Bernardino (in the ocean) [San Clemente?]. On that island lived hechiceros [bewitchers, wizards]. All the people were hechiceros. That was what the old time people told Magd. Magd. does not know the name of the island [Harrington n.d.].

The purpose of the effigy may have centered on its use as a sacred talisman, by which an individual could exercise supernatural power by his special relationship with a dream helper (Hudson, Timbrook, and Rempe 1978:126-127). That the Burrowing Owl held this position among the Yokuts has already been stated, but it is equally possible that it also stood as such for the people of San Clemente Island. Perhaps as archaeological research continues on the island, we may someday know the answer.

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A Series of Discoidals from Northern San Diego County, California

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Discoidals, or stone discs, have been found in a number of sites in southern California (e.g., Shumway, Hubbs, and Moriarty 1961; Walker 1951; Herring 1968; Treganza and