

AN UNUSUAL RITUAL CACHE FROM CA-ORA-263, SEAL BEACH, CALIFORNIA

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This report describes an unusual ritual cache (a phallic pestle-like artifact inserted into a steatite bowl) buried in a middle Late Holocene component of a village site in northern Orange County. The symbology of the cache communicates a fertility/fecundity message wholly consistent with final disposition of the two artifacts within a mortuary context. Thoughts are offered regarding how food processing and food procurement tools or their transformation-representations might become embedded in sacred venues.

Late Holocene coastal southern California iconography embraced phallic and/or vulvar imagery for communications involving fertility/fecundity or related thematics (e.g., Koerper 2001, 2005; Koerper and Labbé 1987, 1989). The least subtle conveyances of sex-based symbology generally are phalli-form representations, some of them relatively graphic, others more conventionalized, and many clearly pestle-like (e.g., Brown et al. 1986; Butler 1974:64, 67; Lee 1981:50-51, 82, 112, 114). More obtuse sex-based symbolism characterizes the so-called birdstones (aka pelican stones and hook stones), dimorphic sexual symbols in which phallic and vulvar components are integrated into a single artifact (Koerper and Labbé 1987, 1989). Another example is that type of mortar/bowl incorporating certain decorative elements, cowrie shell insets, to help project vulvar symbolism (see Koerper 2001).

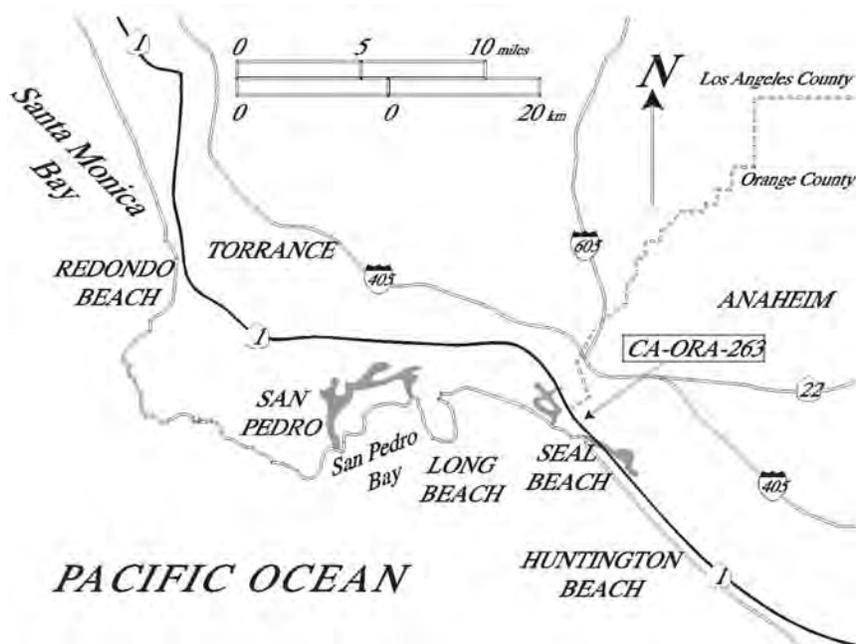
The configurations of some of these artifact types, whether standing for the male principle or the female principle, recall, respectively, two kinds of food preparation technology, the pestle and the mortar/ bowl. Koerper (2001:30-31) stated the obvious when he noted that “the dynamics inherent in the pestle/mortar complex convey a sexual double entendre,” further suggesting that “the metaphoric product of mortar and pestle in congress may build on conditions where modes of production and environmental settings at least periodically bring special immediacy to issues of life forces, human fertility, and nature’s bounty.” Some such artifacts, whether or not intended for ritual/ceremonial employment, erase any ambiguity of meaning by, for instance, appending priapic enhancements to pestles or by further feminizing a mortar/bowl with applications of outer lip cowrie shell inlays onto the rims (see Koerper 2001:31).

This report documents an unusual discovery from CA-ORA-263 (Figure 1)—a mortuary cache (Figure 2) composed of a

phallic, pestle-like artifact (Figure 3) inserted into a micaceous steatite bowl, the arrangement evoking a coital referent. The bowl lacks the aforementioned cowrie insets.

Descriptive treatment of the two artifacts will be preceded by brief notes on the Seal Beach site that yielded up the cache. Considerations of symbology follow, and for this, ethnographic observations and archaeological data are selected from the regional literature. A “Final Thoughts” section proposes that the aetiology of pestle and mortar/ bowl qua magico-religious pestle and mortar/bowl is but one case of a sexualization-sacralization process that similarly applies to other food energy tools, whether employed for food preparation or food procurement, which provide the utilitarian models that transmogrify into representations embedding into ceremonial venues.

Figure 1: Location of CA-ORA-263.



CA-ORA-263

ORA-263 (Figure 1) is one of six prehistoric sites recently investigated by EDAW, Inc., in advance of a housing development within the Hellman Ranch Specific Plan Area, Seal Beach, northern Orange County (York et al. 1997; York and Underwood 2002). Construction monitoring at the sites revealed approximately 35 inhumations, as well as one area within ORA-263 that contained the cremated bones of several individuals. Associated with these cremated remains was a concentration of several broken stone vessels and many other important funerary artifacts that included the two items discussed here (York and Willey 2005).

Preliminary analyses of excavated materials indicate that ORA-263 functioned as a village rather than a seasonal camp, at least at the time when the ritual cache was buried. The artifactual inventory with its varied utilitarian objects, ornaments, and ideotechnic items is consistent with this assessment.

Living adjacent to wetlands, the occupants of this shell midden had easy access to the rich resources of a salt-marsh estuary and bay environment. Fish bone and sea mammal bone indicate procurement activities along the beach and coastal strand. Terrestrial mammal and avian remains are also well represented in the faunal sample.

Other important microenvironments within the catchment included coastal sage scrub and grassland-herbland plant associations. Certainly a freshwater source had been nearby in order that village life be sustained, suggesting the presence of some amount of riparian habitat.

Radiometric assays spanning 5600-700 B.P. and time-sensitive artifacts attest to human activity through the greater parts of both the middle and late Holocene. Radiocarbon dates for the mortuary area in which the phallic "pestle" and steatite bowl were exhumed are given in Table 1. The cache probably dates to the second half of the Intermediate Cultures period.

THE CACHE: DESCRIPTIONS AND SYMBOLIC CONTENT

The most obvious and most universal symbol of fertility is still the fact of reproduction, whether manifested in coitus or parturition (childbirth). In turn, the most obvious symbols of coitus are the sexual organs: the *phallus* (male) and the *kteis* (female). Given the fact that people living close to nature understand the double nature of fecundity, the two symbols generally appear together, because if one is to have "life," one has to have both components of fertility: male and female.... it is fertility that is sacralized and not the sex act [Gravel 1995:56].

Phallic and vulvar symbolisms are evident in the ritual cache (Figure 2) that brought together the unique sandstone ceremonial pestle of Figure 3 and the micaceous steatite mortar/bowl seen in situ in Figure 2. The morphology of the 246-mm long, 75.4-mm wide, pestle-like phallic artifact leaves no doubt as to anatomical referent. Clearly, it is one of the most obvious penis effigies published for coastal southern California. Connected by a straight shaft, the opposite ends of the "pestle" each represent a glans penis. This is probably the only "Janus-headed" phallic artifact recorded for regional prehistory.

One end has been only moderately shaped around a natural hole that evokes a urethral opening (Figure 3b). This natural hole was likely to have motivated the collector of the manuport to retrieve the stone in the first place. Generally, when urethral imagery occurs on effigies depicting the glans penis, the design element is a slit-shaped groove (see Koerper 2001:31, Figure 5c), possibly because that configuration is easier to render than a hole but also possibly because it was taken to convey greater realism. Only a small number of crafted phallic artifacts are reported with similar holes. For instance, from LAN-283, the San Pedro Harbor site, two phallic representations, one siltstone and the other sandstone, each exhibit a small hole "just off center" at the tip of the head (Butler 1974:65-67). Butler does not indicate whether the holes appear natural or manmade. The hole on the Hellman Ranch specimen is likewise just off center.

The other extremity received the greater amount of sculpting, achieving a conventionalized form, albeit one carrying a far more

Table 1: AMS C-14 dates: CA-ORA-263 mortuary area.

Beta No.	Context	Material	Conventional RC Age BP	2 Sigma Calibrated BP	1 Sigma Calibrated BP	Alternate 1 Sigma Calibrated BP	Intercept Years BP
189243	Cremation	Tooth	1760 ± 40	1800-1560	1720-1610	-	1700
191551	Cremation	Tooth	2060 ± 40	2130-1920	2060-1980	-	2000
192662	Feature	Charcoal	1590 ± 40	1550-1390	1530-1420	-	1510
196455	Cremation	Tooth	1870 ± 40	1890-1710	1860-1740	-	1820
196457	Cremation	Tooth	2240 ± 40	2340-2140	2330-2300	2260-2160	2320
196454	Cremation	Tooth	2150 ± 40	2190-2010	2160-2100	-	2140
196453	Cremation	Tooth	1950 ± 40	1990-1820	1930-1860	-	1890
196448	Cremation	Tooth	1660 ± 40	1630-1500	1580-1530	-	1550

recognizable degree of anatomical correctness. Indeed, with rare exception (e.g., Lee 1981:114, Figure 34a), the realism is far more convincing than what is witnessed for most regional phallic representations with tell-tale “knobs,” “heads,” or “priapic enhancements.” Lesser degrees of realism characterize the so-called spikes (e.g., Anonymous 1938; Butler 1974:65, 67; Koerper 2001:32, 33; Koerper et al. 1996:5; Van Valkenburgh 1931; Wallace 1987; Winterbourne 1967:20-21; see also Rozaire 1958:13), certain phallic-like pestles (e.g., Hudson and Blackburn 1983:122-127; Koerper 2001:31, Figure 5a; Lee 1981:50), and penis effigies such as those illustrated in Butler (1974:65), Lee (1981:112), Brown et al. (1986:19), etc.

The micaceous steatite material of the mortar/bowl is very soft, easily scored with a fingernail. When refitted, the two large pieces of the receptacle reveal that a roughly triangular shaped sherd had been dislodged from the bottom of the artifact, a suggestion that the object may have been ritually killed.

Bowl and “pestle” were discovered in flagrante delicto (Figure 2), a circumstance that allows the mortar/bowl to project, ipso facto, vulvar imagery. It was the more graphic end of the phallic symbol that penetrated into the broken artifact.

Various ethnographic sources indicate that mortars were often equated with female genitalia. For instance, Kroeber (1925:528) recounts from Chukchansi mythology the attribution of stone mortar holes to Coyote, “who employed an agency of manufacture that decency debars from mention.” Indeed, Coyote was seen as the maker of bedrock mortars and/or portable mortars by many Native Californian and Great Basin peoples (e.g., Aginsky 1943:406; Driver 1937:68; Gifford and Kroeber 1937:138; Stewart 1941:286; Stewart 1941:381; Voegelin 1938:17).

Regionally, ethnographic sources support the proposition that mortars/bowls might at times stand for the female principle in ritual. Yates (1889:305; see also Abbott 1879b:215, Figure 96) recorded inclusion of a bowl

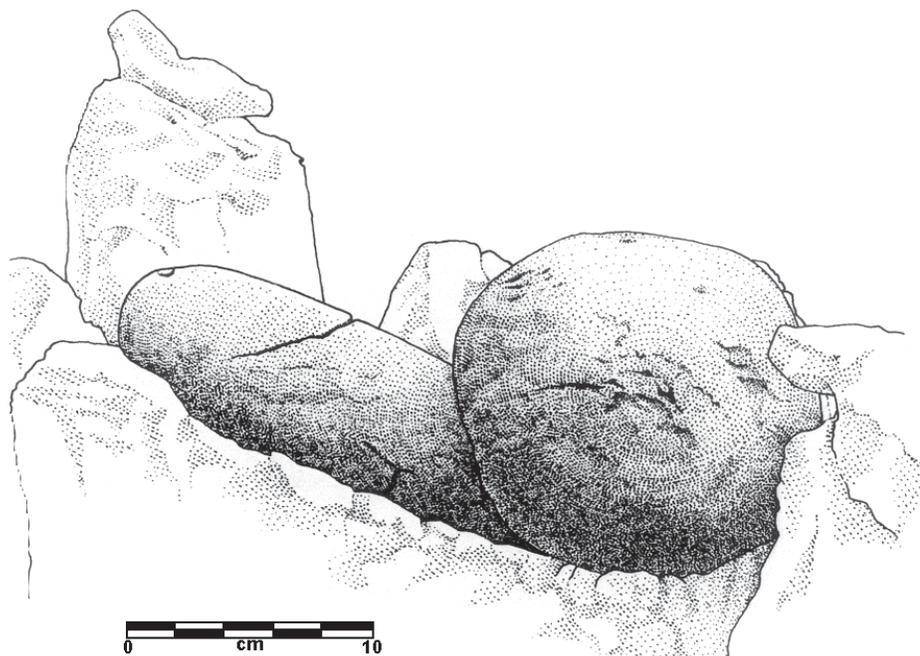
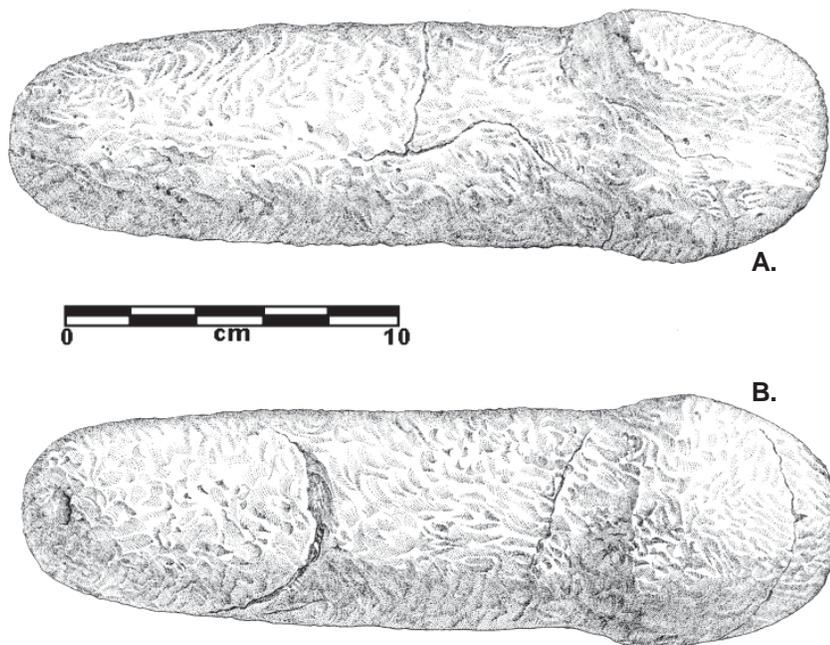


Figure 2: Mortuary cache (phallic stone and steatite bowl) in situ. Drawn from a field photograph.

in a Chumash ceremony laden with sex-based imagery. He described twenty birdstones, a genre regarded by some scholars as dimorphic sexual symbols (Koerper and Labbé 1987, 1989), all arranged to form a square, inside of which sat a bowl of water. A shaman, using a long cigar-shaped pipe, blew smoke at the bowl and then toward the birdstones. One purpose of such a ceremony might be to bring rain, but varied magical outcomes were possible.

Figure 3: Phallic pestle from CA-ORA-263. Two views.



It has long been recorded in regional prehistory that the outer lip of the local cowrie shell, *Cypraea spadicea*, was broken away from the shell to be worked not only into a body ornament but also to fashion an inset that might be glued with asphaltum onto the rims of mortars (Abbott 1879a:72, 78; King 1982:526-531; Koerper 2001:30-33; Putnam 1879:252, 256, 259). Putnam and Abbott failed to consider the implications of mortar rims ringed with cowrie insets, perhaps because neither scholar was aware that cross-culturally the cowrie frequently stands as a life-force symbol, owing to the perfunctory resemblance between the shell's orifice and the human vulva (e.g., Gobert 1951; Gravel 1995:60, 93, 119-120; Kenyon 1941:341-342; Safer and Gill 1982; see also Koerper 2001:33). Sex-based symbolism clearly attached to the shell in local iconography (Koerper 2001). Koerper (2001) presents a strong case that cowrie embellishments encircling mortar openings are best explained as visual enhancements of vulvar imagery.

Abbott's failure, if not Putnam's too, to connect the pestle and mortar/bowl complex to regional cosmology reflects, it seems, a lack of familiarity with the mindset of technologically primitive man. When Abbott became aware of the interpretation of Rocco (1874) regarding certain large pestles and mortars in California as sacred symbols for the phallus and the *yoni*, he labeled such "deductions" as "simply ridiculous," adding that "even should we find pestles, or other articles, so carved to represent the male organ, they might well be considered simply as examples of savage obscenity or fantasy" (1879a:92).

Gravel (1995:63-64) offers succinct commentary relevant to this subject:

for some reason, we seem to have alienated ourselves so much from nature that when we look at the symbolism of yesteryear, we fail to understand how critically important the duality of fertility was to our predecessors....ancient fertility symbols are almost always dual representations, that is, they symbolize both the male and female principles. Even when one only is emphasized, the other is usually implied. Not only is the duality itself critical, but so is the fact that, for thousands of years, people have found it essential to express this duality in their fertility symbols....The sheer abundance of double symbols is overwhelming, but they must be understood for what they are: the union of the male and female principles, which in reproducing also produce the means whereby people survive. It will explain also the abysmal anxiety of people faced with non-production. Non-production means death and starvation. Hence the collective obsession with symbols of fertility [Gravel 1995:63-64].

Unquestionably, the ORA-263 cache stands for a union of the male and female principles, but is there a contradiction when final disposition of life force symbolisms occurs within a funerary context? In other words, what sorts of communications are involved when fertility/fecundity-related effigies, singly or collectively, are offered as grave goods?

As symbolic expressions of regeneration, such artifacts in mortuary ritual cast death as generator of life (see Arriaza 1995; Bloch and Perry 1982; Donovan 1985; Geertz 1973; Salomon 1991). Juxtapositions of death symbols and life symbols sustain illusions of the awesomeness of supernatural presence, thereby reinforcing belief in eternal life and mitigating the angst occasioned by contemplations of mortality (see Geertz 1973:110).

To further grasp the mentalistic landscape underlying the sexualization of death, one might ask, "does the collective mind easily connect the acts of procreating and dying?" Burkert's observations (Burkert 1979:72) are instructive: "Sexual reproduction and death are the basic facts of life. Mutually determinant and interwoven, both are acted out in the sacrificial ritual, in the tension between renunciation and fulfillment, destruction and reparation....Thus, ritual itself serves in the process by which the group perpetuates its existence through death." In all of this we have major driving themes of cosmology – life (its generation) and death.

It is well documented locally that pestles, mortars/bowls, or both found their ways into burials and cremations (e.g., Abbott 1879a:70, 85; Hudson 1969:21; King 1982:526-531; Gamble et al. 2001:194). Gamble et al. (2001:194) considered that utilitarian tools, including pestles and mortar/bowls, buried with the deceased might "continue to have utilitarian function among the dead," but they wisely suggested the possibility that "their symbolic significance in burial contexts is unrelated to their former use in the subsistence activities of the living." The present study has indicated much of what that "symbolic significance" is most likely to have been.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This last section proposes how mundane tools might assume transformed identities and become embedded within contexts of sacred thought and behavior. The case of pestles and mortars in the service of food preparation versus mortars and pestles serving ritual purposes offers a straightforward entry into this subject.

Consider first that ritual is repetitive stereotypical behavior which, on a psychological level, functions to reduce anxiety. Belief systems rationalize and justify ritual. Consider that major sources of anxiety in preliterate societies are rooted especially in concerns regarding securing food energy and regarding the phenomenon of death.

The technologies that most easily associate with sustenance include those employed in food preparation. The ease of sacralization of food preparation artifacts, and hence their passport to magico-religious venues, depends on whether another crucial association is achieved, to wit, a connection between food preparation and nature's bounty/fertility/fecundity. It is a sexualization of pestles and/or mortars that abets sacralization. The shapes of each processing tool lend themselves to sex-based symbology, and as previously noted, the action of mortar and pestle during milling allows for an easy sexual double entendre.

A more inclusive interpretive framework incorporates food procurement technology. Elsewhere, Koerper (e.g., 2005) has applied the sexualization-sacralization model to donut stones, those coastal southern California artifacts sometimes ritually cached with other genres linked to fertility/fecundity and sometimes found in mortuary contexts, a certain clue to their status as life-force symbols. In brief compass, the argument unfolds thus: the mundane referent of the ritual donut stone is the digging stick weight. The digging stick with its weight is, for the edification of the innocent-minded, a hard shaft

running through an object with a hole. The dynamism of the tool in action, paralleling mortar and pestle, conveys a sure double entendre – again, an easy sexualization as precondition to sacralization.

The aetiologies of transformation-representations for other kinds of food procurement and food preparation artifacts, while not so transparent, might conform to the same sexualization-sacralization process. It is proposed that the basic analytical approach offered here should be productive for similar investigations – those involving plummet-like charmstones, birdstones, canoe dream charms, large ceremonial bifaces, and even those metates dedicated to mortuary practice. These are the subjects of future discourse.

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