

A UNIQUE TURTLE EFFIGY FROM CA-ORA-269

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This report describes a siltstone turtle effigy excavated from CA-ORA-269, located in the San Joaquin Hills of Orange County. A discussion broaches the question of why turtle effigies are so rare in the archaeological record of southern California.

Native stone artisans in southern California sculpted a variety of portable effigies described as representing numerous vertebrates, including cetaceans, pinnipeds, sea otters, terrestrial mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians (e.g., Alliot 1969:130; Bryan 1930:148, 1970:59; Cameron 2000:20-33, 38-39; de Cessac 1951:9; Decker 1969; Greenwood 1962, 1967, 1969:46-48; Holmes 1902:184, Plate 47; Hudson 1978:262-265; Hudson and Blackburn 1986; Koerper 2005; Koerper and Labbé 1987, 1989; Lee 1981; McKusick and Warren 1959:Figure 12.6; Miller 1991:62; Musser 1980; Putnam 1879:219-222, Figures 101, 102; Rogers 1929:387-388, Plate 74; Schumacher 1877; Zahniser 1981:A4). Even one invertebrate, the sand dollar, joins the menagerie of effigies (Hudson and Blackburn 1986:235; see also Blackburn 1975:96; Hudson and Underhay 1978:52). With little exception (see Lee 1981:82, 111; Lopez 2004), lithic craftsmen seem to have avoided turtle imagery, an observation seemingly at odds with the numerous ethnographic and ethnohistoric references to turtle shell rattles employed in ritual and ceremony. This report describes a highly conventionalized “turtle” recovered from ORA-269 and considers why turtle effigies are underrepresented in the archaeological record.

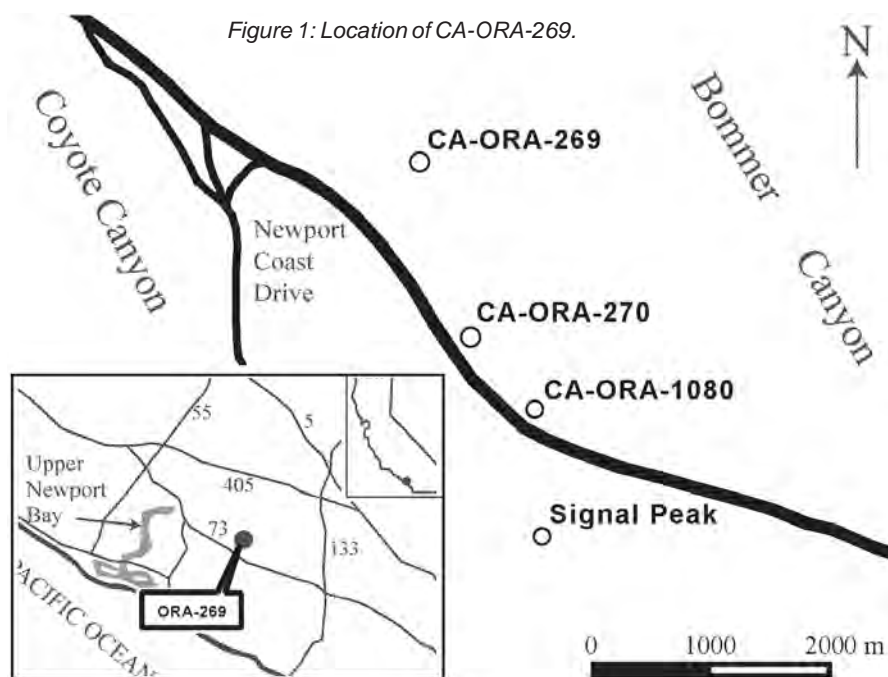
rockshelters with associated midden. Radiocarbon assays indicate the shelter was used primarily post-A. D. 100, and principally in the Late Prehistoric Period, although two dates show the shelter was known to the local inhabitants as early as circa 800 B. C. (Strudwick 2004:35). Until recently, a small spring was located 40 m south and downslope from the shelter. This water source surfaced on exposed bedrock and was observed to provide a steady flow of water even in summer months during a three-year drought.

ORA-269 is particularly notable for also being a petroglyph and pictograph site in a county which, due to limited geological formations conducive to rock art preservation, probably has less rock art than any other region in California (McCarthy 1992; Office of Historic Preservation 1988). The petroglyph is a zigzag line and a cupule-like depression. Together, these design elements, first recorded by Antos (1969), strongly suggest a snake motif. Indeed, the rockshelter was known informally as Rattlesnake Cave owing to this rock art. Additionally, there is a faded red, diamond-shaped pictograph also gracing a rear panel of the shelter near the petroglyph.

CA-ORA-269

Site ORA-269 is a rockshelter and associated midden apron on the northern slope of the San Joaquin Hills near their western terminus above Newport Bay (Figure 1). It rests but a short distance north of the San Joaquin Hills Transportation Corridor. The shelter is an enlarged recess into a sandstone boulder outcrop. Measuring approximately 13 m across the face and over 2 m high at its greatest extent, the useful portion of the rockshelter is about 10 m wide and between 3 and 4 m deep.

The site's dense deposit of marine shell, fire-affected rock, and flaked and ground stone artifacts covers an area of approximately 1,800 m², larger than nearly all of the other local San Joaquin Hills



ORA-269 is within a 10-minute walk from another rock art site, ORA-270, which features an incised horizontal diamond chain panel. Fifteen minutes away is ORA-180, which produced a rattlesnake effigy (Koerper 2005) made of the same local siltstone as the turtle effigy discussed herein.

EFFIGY DESCRIPTION

The incised siltstone turtle effigy from ORA-269 (Figure 2) comes from the 30-40 cm level of one of the westernmost excavation units at the western mouth of the shelter overhang. Unit 60 was excavated to 120 cm. Radiocarbon data from nearby Units 25 and 51 (Strudwick 2004:35) indicate that the turtle-like carving likely dates between A. D. 1500 and 1800.

The artifact measures 85.8 mm in length, 70.4 mm in width, and 30.9 mm in height, and it weighs 240.5 g. It is made from half a siltstone cobble. The cobble has a naturally rounded appearance and was stream-worn prior to being split in two with a blow to what is now the posterior area of the "turtle."

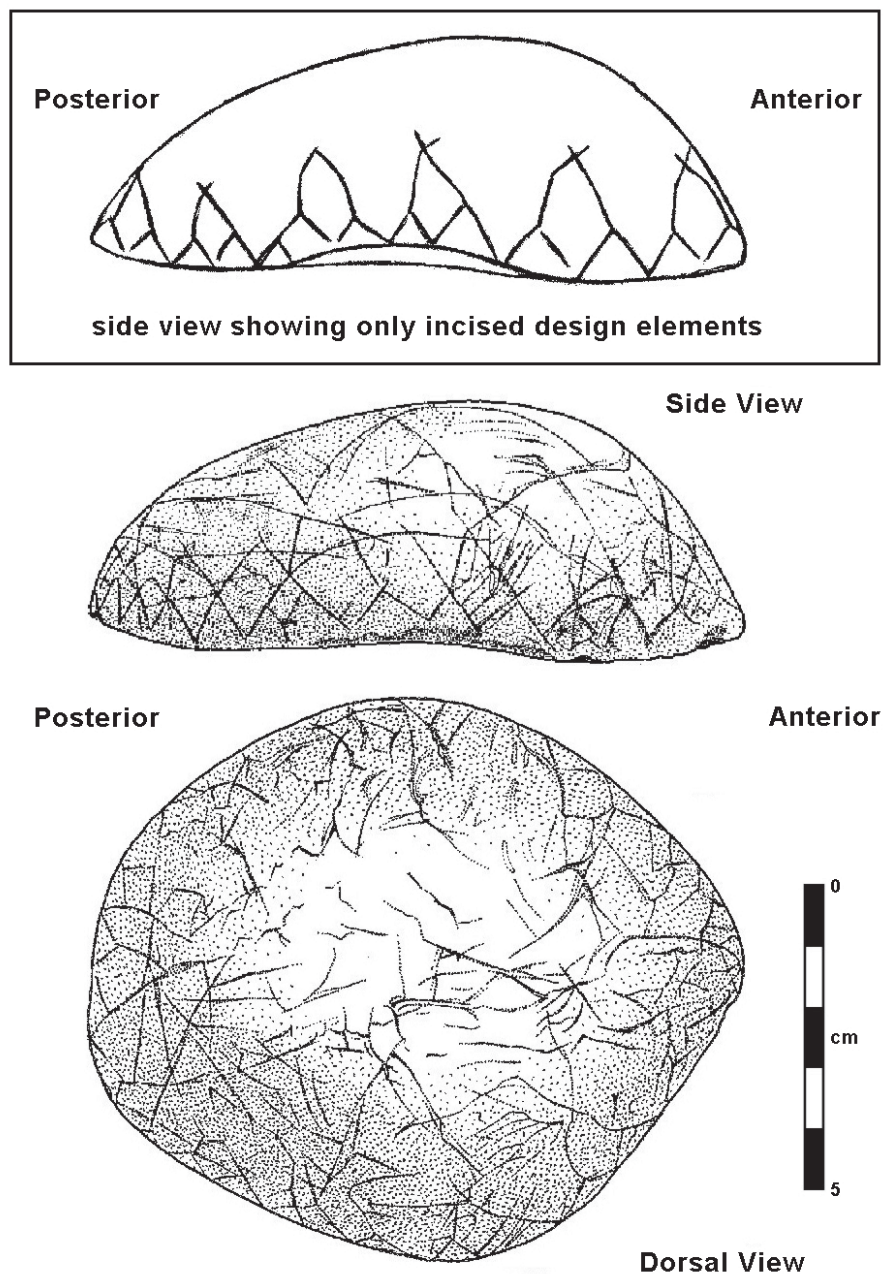
A plethora of intersecting incised lines run the entire periphery of the inferior margin of the "carapace," or dorsal shell covering the back of the effigy (Figure 2). The artist's intention, it seems, was to suggest the lower sculpted surface of a turtle's dorsal shell. However, the repeating triangular and other design elements offer an imperfect copy of the quadrilateral scutes, or horny plates, circumferentially decorating the lower carapace of the western pond turtle (*Clemmys marmorata*; see Figure 3), almost certainly the referent species (see Jaeger and Smith 1971:42, 43; Schoenherr 1992:626). Incising toward the upper surface of the carapace offers an even poorer mimic to the superior scutes since the lines appear somewhat haphazard, not clearly setting out any convincing pattern of natural polygonal divisions. Nonetheless, the overall appearance of combined plastic and graphic aspects suggests the artifact is a turtle effigy.

The dorsal side also exhibits polishing and wear, and is darker around the periphery. The wear of the upper surface has partially obliterated some of the sculpted design. The darkness to the periphery of the dorsal side appears to have been caused by dirt and grime being rubbed into the stone, probably by being held for extended periods.

The effigy's plastron (ventral shell covering the belly of a turtle) somewhat mimics the morphology of the bottom surface of a real turtle. This surface also exhibits incising, including two carefully made lines that divide the ventral shell into quarters. One line runs the full length of the item and is transected by lateral incising running from one edge to the other. The intent of the artisan appears to have been the creation of design elements imitating the large horny plates that cover the outer surface of a turtle's plastron.

Observing the specimen from the flat ventral surface and with the anterior end upward, some slight controlled percussion is evident in three areas. Along the forward right side, there are two adjacent flake scars, and a single small flake has been removed from the lower right

Figure 2: Turtle effigy from CA-ORA-269.



side. Also, the majority of the upper left side exhibits several small percussion flake scars. The aforementioned incised lines were produced prior to the edge flaking, since some incisions end abruptly where flakes were removed.

Subsequent to the incising and then flaking, the bottom surface was unevenly worn and polished, with greatest wear along one edge. This is evident in the once-sharp edges, which are worn, and also in the incised lines, which appear smoothed. Although all of the edges are worn, the smoothest is the right side of the item, the side opposite that most heavily flaked, when the item's ventral surface is viewed anterior end up. The polishing appears to have been purposeful and probably occurred against a soft surface such as a hide.

The polish exhibited on the periphery and base of the ventral side, in conjunction with the discoloration caused by holding the artifact, suggests the possibility that the once-sharp edges of this split siltstone cobble may have been used to scrape or soften hides. If the turtle effigy had also been used as a tool, it would make the object all the more unusual. The question of possible utilitarian function is the subject of future research.

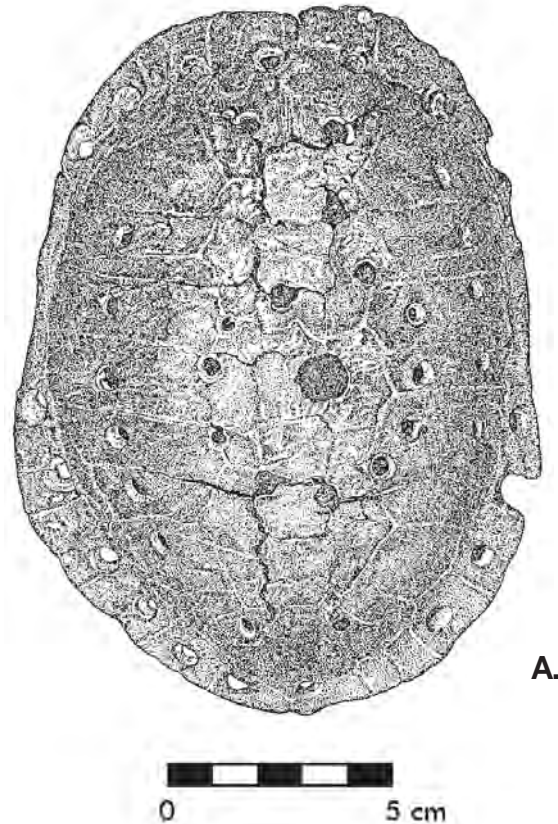
DISCUSSION

Perhaps the extreme rarity of turtle effigies in the archaeological record of southern California might reflect an absence of any significant role for the reptile in regional cosmology, although there may have been some important role of which anthropological science is unaware. Interestingly, there are certain animals with high profiles in regional worldview that also seem not to have been immortalized in stone, including the coyote and most of the avenging animals of the god Chinigchinich. Some animals with cosmological importance, such as certain cetaceans and the swordfish, have received some attention from stone craftsmen.

Some of the animals represented in stone were important sources of food, particularly cetaceans and fish, but some were not eaten. Overall, the pond turtle probably contributed little to the menu. Rather, the greatest contribution of the turtle to the lives of local Native peoples was probably its shell, which was used for the manufacture of a musical instrument.

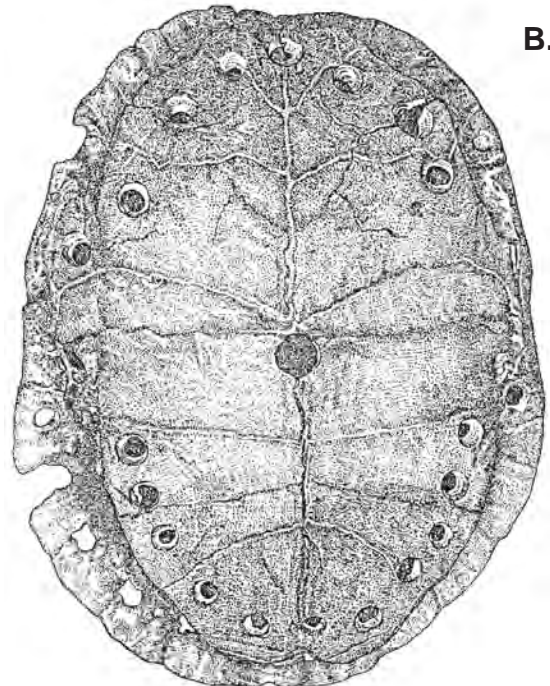
In regional ethnography, the turtle shell rattle (figures 3 and 4) is the most frequently documented containment-type percussion instrument (e.g., Boscana 1978:42, 58; Driver 1941:35; Drucker 1937:25; DuBois 1908:181, 183; Harrington 1934:38, 1935:82, Figure 76, 1942:28; Hudson et al. 1977:82, 84; Hudson and Blackburn 1986:329-332; Kroeber 1925:641; Sparkman 1908:210; White 1963:130). The turtle shell rattle also appears sporadically in the archaeological record of both the Channel Islands (e.g., Gifford 1940:176, 221; Heys 1921:114, 115, Plate 71; Van Valkenburgh 1932:52) (Figure 3 A and B) and the mainland (e.g., Wallace 1980).

Coadunated shells, carapace plus plastron (figures 3 and 4), provide the basic containment chamber for a rattle's moving elements,



A.

Figure 3: Turtle (*Clemmys marmorata*) shell rattle from Long Beach. (A) dorsal view (showing carapace), (B) ventral view (showing plastron). After Wallace 1980:102-104.



B.

that is, small stones (e.g., Boscana 1978:42) or seeds (see Harrington 1978:160). Asphaltum was applied to plug the holes where the animal head, tail, and legs had once protruded (Hudson and Blackburn 1986:33). From one to three, rarely as many as five western pond turtle (*Clemmys marmorata*) shells would be set transversely on shafts that served as handles (Harrington 1978:160, also 1935:82).

Curiously, turtle imagery is virtually absent from the cosmology of coastal southern California, yet turtle shell rattles are used at various ceremonial venues. Boscana (1978:42), for instance, relates that turtle shell rattles were continually shaken as on the occasion of Juaneño chief dancing in the *vanquech* before the Chinigchinich image or as when a ritual with undertones of a fertility/fecundity theme involved the son of a Juaneño chief dancing and adorned for the first time publicly wearing the *tobet* (Boscana 1978:60; Harrington 1934:442; see Kroeber 1925:641). Both sexes, at least for some dances, could use this type of instrument (Boscana 1978:58; Harrington 1934:38).

The Chumash shook turtle shell rattles in both the Fox Dance and the Bear Dance (Hudson et al. 1977:82, 84). Turtle shell rattles were also used in girls' puberty rites (e.g., Driver 1941:35).

In Luiseño territory, turtle shell rattles assumed the stature of power objects in rites of peacemaking between rival rancherías. Raymond White (1963:13) records events that forced the people of Pauma to sue for peace following fierce fighting against Pechanga. Assembled together in the Pechanga *wamkish*, the rival groups feasted, sang songs of insult, hate, and aggression, and witnessed "obscene" dances. When the Pauma war chief used his turtle shell rattle to accompany his singers, all manner of hatred and aggression was said to have been channeled into the instrument, which the war chief subsequently smashed to pieces. This ceremony of peace concluded with the broken parts being buried in the *wamkish*. The ritual was repeated soon after but roles were reversed, with the inhabitants of Pauma now hosting their former Pechanga enemies.

Parenthetically, Hudson and Blackburn (1986:330) wrote that the turtle shell instrument was gradually replaced by other percussive containment instruments made of tin cans or cowhide. However, in some places the turtle shell rattle survived as a ritual instrument into the twentieth century. For instance, in 1911, William McPherson (1968:137) witnessed this artifact in a *totenish*, or image ceremony, held on the Pechanga Reservation. The mourning ceremony in which this rattle was used would have guaranteed that the spirits of the deceased, which were represented by images, would forever depart.

On a final thought, had prehistoric native people had need of turtle imagery, for whatever symbolic purposes, that need may have been covered by possession of the actual shell made into the rattle. This may have acted to lessen demand for turtle representations in stone.

Acknowledgments

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Figure 4: Shell rattle, probably Diegueño, housed at the San Diego Museum of Man. After Wallace 1980:106.

produced the illustrations in figures 2 - 4. Tyson Koerper provided Figure 1, and Kris Walden of the LSA Graphics Department assisted with figure production.

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