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Cowry Shells: Fertility/Fecundity Symbols In Southern California Iconography

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Ornamental employment of Chestnut Cowry (Cypraea spadicea) shell artifacts in southern California prehistory included inlay work set into the rims of mortars and bowls. These and other observations are marshaled to develop circumstantial evidence pointing to a linkage of cowry shells with sex-based symbolism. More direct evidence from J. P. Harrington's notes connect the cowry symbolically to the vulva.

Cross-culturally employed as ornament, amulet/charm, money, gaming/gambling counter, divination piece (e.g., Quiggin 1949:25-26, Einzig 1966; Cabrera 1974; Bascom 1980; Hogendorn and Johnson 1986; Opitz 1992; Gabriel 1996), and for other purposes (e.g., Kay 1985:4), the cowry shell has also stood as a life force symbol, owing to a perfunctory resemblance between the shell's orifice and the human vulva (e.g., Kenyon 1941:341-342; Gobert 1951; Safer and Gill 1982; Gravel 1995:60, 93, 119-120). Even the generic name chosen by Linnaeus, *Cypraea*, relates to a fertility/fecundity theme, for the Latin derives from the island of Cyprus, home to the earliest location for worship of Aphrodite (Cypris; also Cytherea), the Romans' Venus.

Cowry shells were a fixture of prehistoric coastal southern California culture. They served as adornment on persons and things (Anon. 1938b; King 1981; King 1982:323-325, 422-425; Hudson and Blackburn 1985:277; Koerper and Whitney-Desautels 1999), as grave offerings (e.g., Anon. 1938c; King 1981; King 1982), as pacifiers for babies (Harrington 1986:Pl. 116, Fr. 49), and, speculatively, as clappers for rattles (Anon. 1938a, 1938c, 1939; Winterbourne 1967:35). Published ethnographic notes are limited, describing only some decorative uses of cowries (Wiedmann n.d.; Hudson 1977:12; Hudson and Blackburn 1983:78, 109-110), never offering information to directly associate cowries with fertility/fecundity. This study, building first on circumstantial evidence, develops the view that, as elsewhere, sex-based symbolism attached to the shell in local iconography. Recently recognized direct evidence, gleaned from J. P. Harrington's notes and heretofore unpublished, helps corroborate the previously derived interpretation (Koerper 2000).

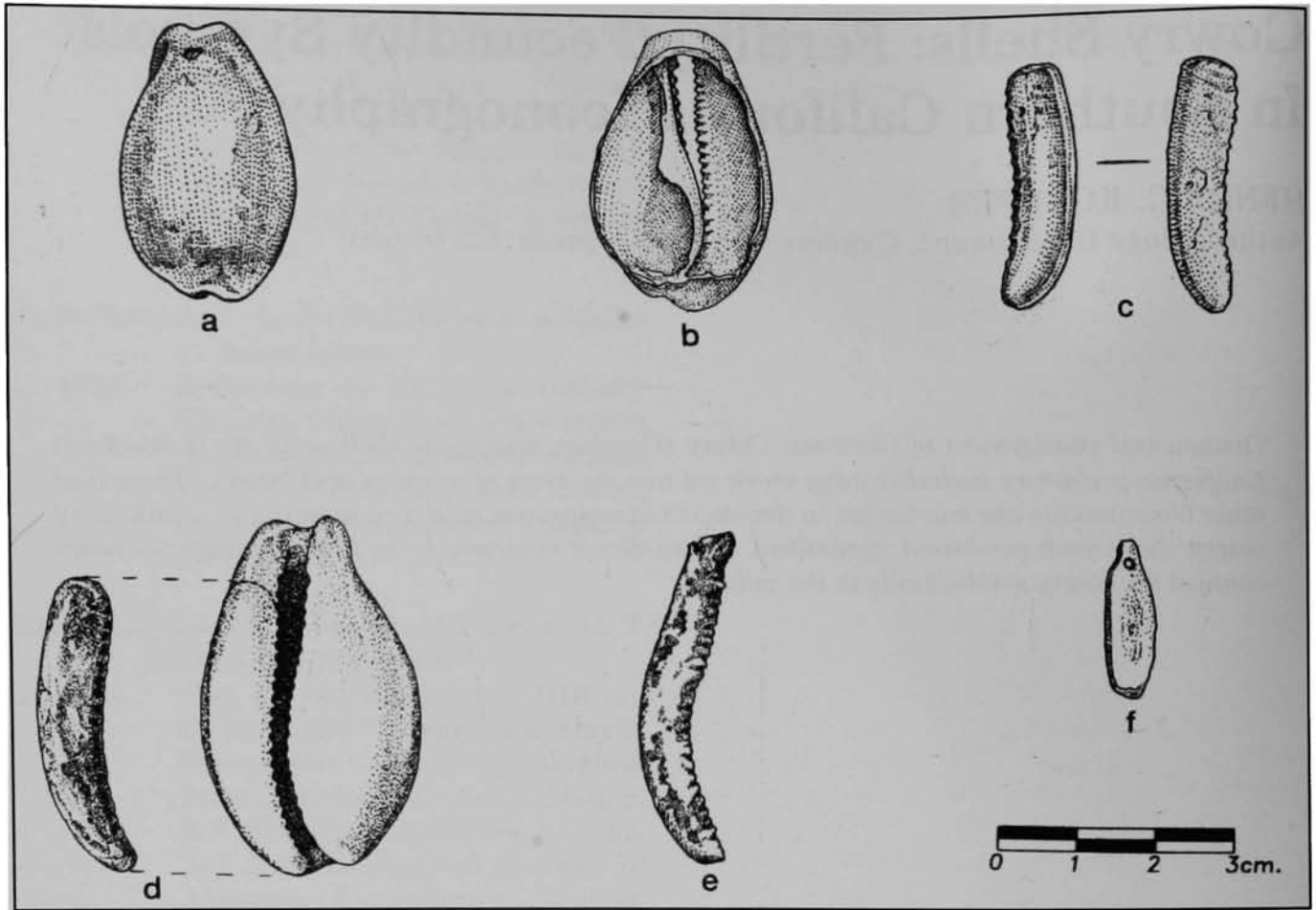


Figure 1. *Cypraea spadicea* (Chestnut Cowry) specimens (a) Back-punched cowry, CA-ORA-855; (b) Back-removed cowry, CA-ORA-855; Outer lip cowry inlay, CA-ORA-855; (d) Outer lip cowry inlay, CA-ORA-855, with illustration of its position in the shell; (e) Outer lip cowry inlay from the Medea Creek collection (courtesy UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Archaeological Collections Facility); (f) Cowry pendant (after King 1982:501).

BACKGROUND

Only two specimens of nonindigenous cowries have earlier been reported for Orange County. Questionably, a Money Cowry shell (*Cypraea moneta*) was unearthed with a burial (Strandt 1965:31), and at CA-ORA-83, a Little Deer Cowry (*Cypraea cervinetta*) was collected from site surface (see Koerper and Whitney-Desautels n.d.). Only recently has the author become aware of an unprovenanced *Cypraea annettae* Cowry shell recovered (S. O'Neil, personal communication 2001) at an Orange County midden. This species is found in the Gulf of California, but it also grows on the Pacific side of lower Baja California (Burgess 1985:102).

All other cowry shell artifacts and cowry detritus retrieved from southern California middens are attributed to one species, *Cypraea spadicea* (Chestnut Cowry) (Fig. 1a,d), since only this representative of the largely tropical family Cypraeidae lives along Channel Island and adjacent coastal shores (Fig. 2), occurring only sporadically north of Santa Barbara County (Morris 1966:79; McLean 1978:39; Burgess 1985:106).

The local ethnographic record gives but cursory recognition to the employment of cowries. A Juaneño informant related a practical use for the local back punched cowry. It was given to babies to hold in their mouths to suck on. A string was attached through the punched

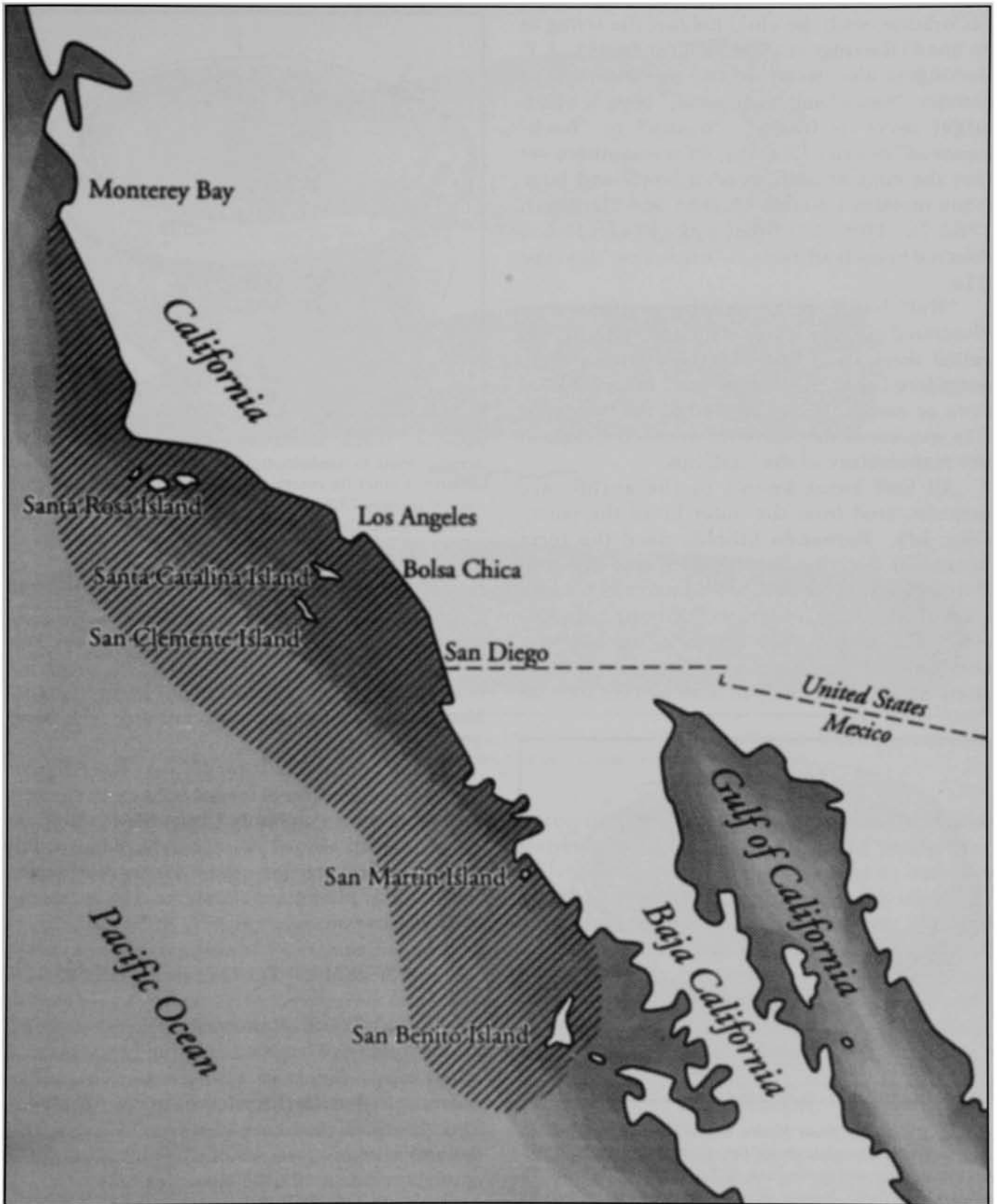


Figure 2. Range of *Cypraea spadicea* (after Burgess 1985:106).

perforation, with the child holding the string in its hand (Harrington 1986:Pl. 116, Fr. 49). J. P. Harrington also described two modifications of cowries, "bases" and "half bases," both of which might serve as inlays. "Bases," or "back-removed" cowries (Fig. 1b), were sometimes set into the rims of both wooden bowls and large stone mortars (cited in Hudson and Blackburn 1983:78, 109-110). Gifford (1947:11, 69) referred to such artifacts as "whole lips," his type H1a.

"Half base" refers to the artifact type illustrated in Figures 1c-e. Gifford (1947:11, 69) called these "half lips," his type H1b, and he considered that they might have functioned as saws or rasps. He hypothesized that the type H1a specimens may have represented a stage in the manufacture of the "half lips."

All half bases known to the author are manufactured from the outer lip of the cowry (Fig. 1d). Fernando Librado used the term *'ayapiliti* for the "half base," and he told Harrington that he once saw a large mortar with six of these inlays set into its "three finger wide" rim. The inlays were about 1.5 inches long (Hudson and Blackburn 1983:109-110). Great stone mortars are likely to have had ceremonial

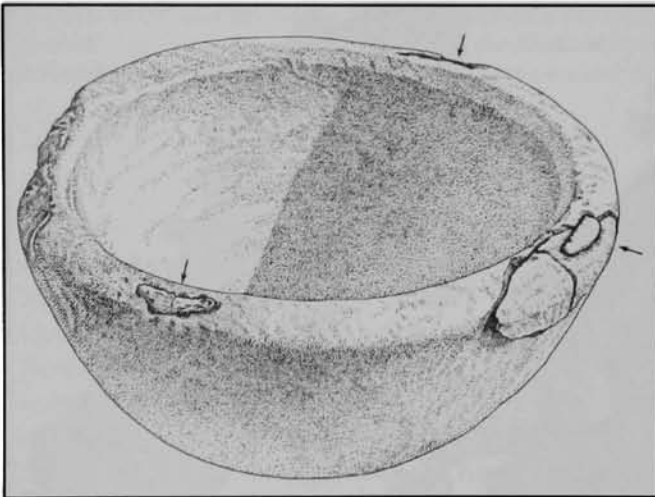


Figure 3. Mortar from Medea Creek Cemetery (CA-LAN-243). Nearly complete outer lip cowry inlay at far right. Remnant inlay and asphaltum at 7 o'clock. Depression for inlay at 1 o'clock. Mortar diameter is 28.8 cm. (Courtesy UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Archaeological Collections Facility).

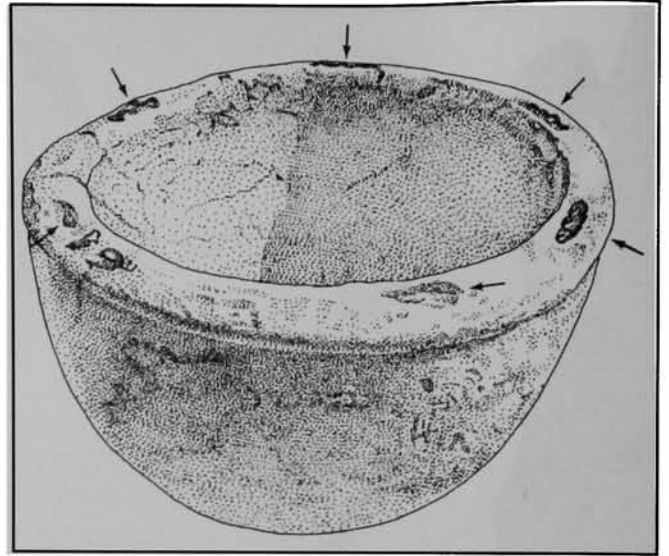


Figure 4. Mortar, Medea Creek Cemetery (CA-LAN-243). Arrows point to asphaltum filled depressions which once contained inner lip cowry inlays. Mortar diameter is 28.2 cm. (Courtesy UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Archaeological Collections Facility).

functions (Hudson and Blackburn 1983:109-110). The Medea Creek Cemetery (CA-LAN-243) sandstone mortars of Figures 3 and 4 have rims with small depressions into which outer lip cowry inlays had been cemented with asphaltum. Most of the inlays are now missing (see King 1982:526-531).

From Chumash informants, Harrington learned that both large brown (Chestnut Cowry) and small pink (probably Coffee Bean shell, or *Trivia californiana*) were employed to inlay their vessels. *T. californiana* shells grow locally and bear some resemblance to cowry shells (Wiedmann n.d.; Hudson 1977:12).

BACKGROUND TO THE HYPOTHESIS

The two kinds of mortar/bowl cowry inlays, "bases" and "half bases," are virtually prima facie testimony for the idea that cowries communicated fertility/fecundity symbolism. The view proffered here observes first that the dynamics inherent in the pestle/mortar complex conveys a sexual double entendre.

Indeed, mortar as vulva appears in mythological accounts such as the Chuchchansi

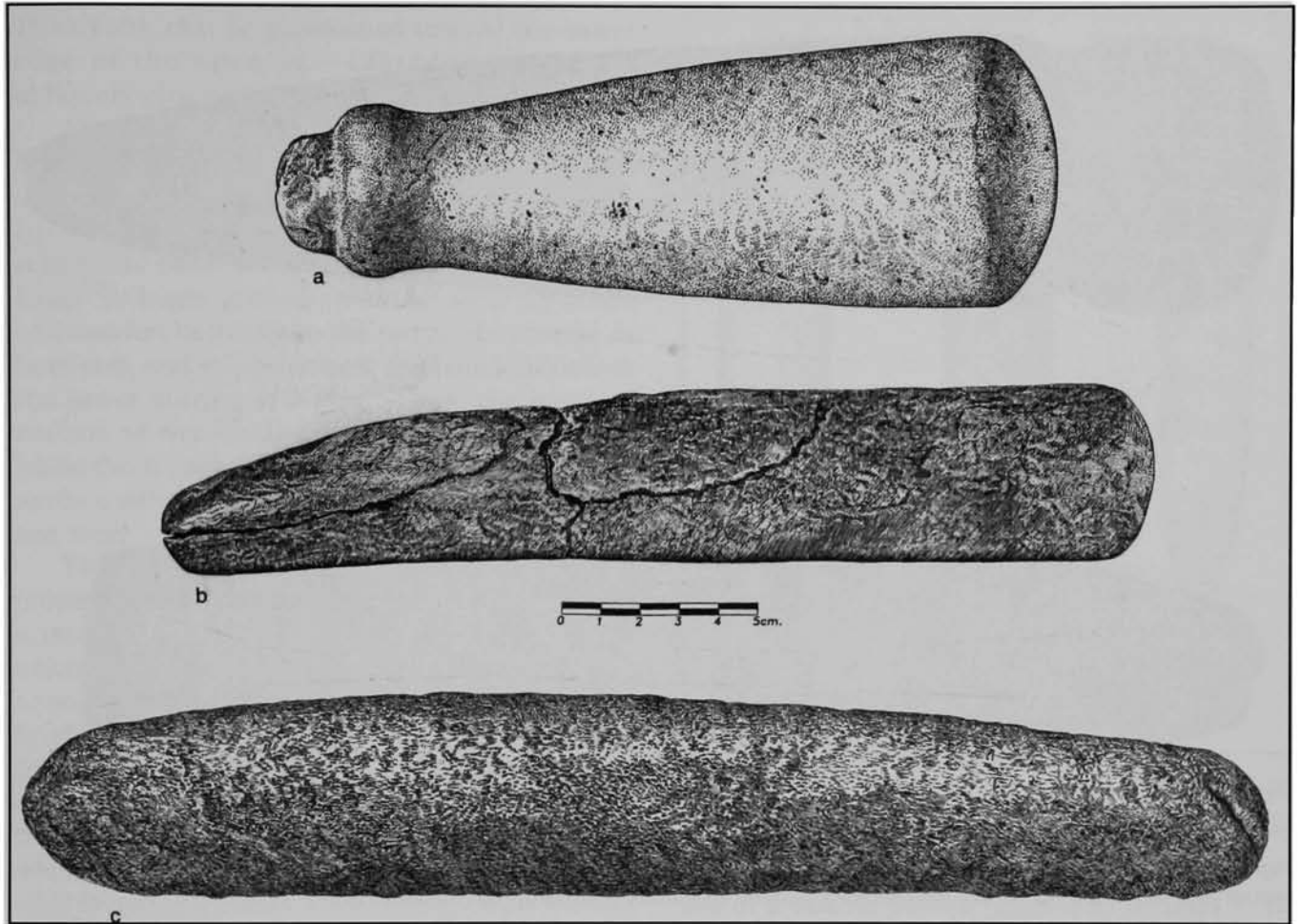


Figure 5. Pestles: (a) Courtesy Mission San Juan Capistrano Museum collection; (b) Bonita Site (CA-ORA-107), excavated by WPA (Courtesy Santa Ana College collection); CA-ORA-660, Newport Coast Archaeological Project.

story that attributed “all stone mortar holes, in situ as well as portable, to the coyote, who employed an agency of manufacture that decency debars from mention” (Kroeber 1925:528). Many Native Californian and Great Basin peoples recognized Coyote as the maker of bedrock mortars and/or portable mortars (e.g., Gifford and Kroeber 1937:138; Driver 1937:68; Voegelin 1938:17; Steward 1941:286; Stewart 1941:381; Aginsky 1943:406). Speculatively, 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.

Pestle as phallus is writ large in the graphic

representations of numerous southern California pestles and in the associations of pestle-like artifacts with other objects inferred to embody sexual content. With mortar as female element, cowry decorations encircling a mortar opening are best explained as visual enhancements of vulvar imagery, a palpable argument since so many cultures associate the cowry shell with reproduction or a related theme. This perspective is expanded below.

DISCUSSION

Notwithstanding the generally phallic morphology of virtually all pestles, artisans occasionally provided these tools with priapic enhancements that exceeded any compelling

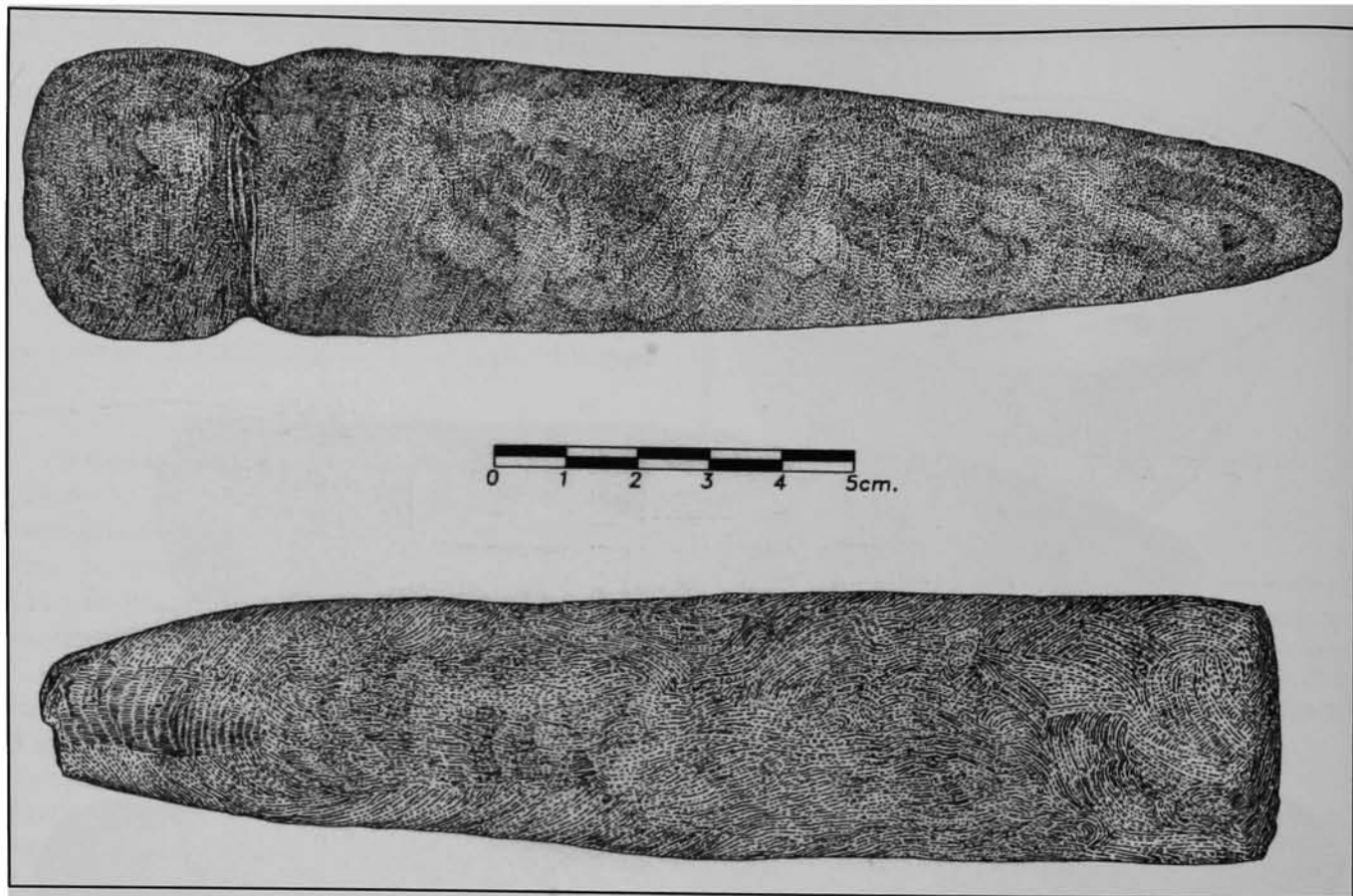


Figure 6. "Spikes" from CA-ORA-278, the Corona del Mar site, found in association with a steatite birdstone (dimorphic sexual symbol) and a perforated steatite disc. (Anon. 1938a:73; and Winterbourne 1967:21).

utilitarian necessity (Lee 1981:50; Hudson and Blackburn 1983:122-127) (Fig.5). Equally revealing are certain pestle-like artifacts (Fig.6 and 7), often labeled "spikes," which are characteristically knobbed at one end and tapered at their opposite end (see Van Valkenburgh 1931; Anon. 1938a; Winterbourne 1967:20-21; Butler 1974:65, 67; Wallace 1987; Koerper and Cramer 1988:101; Koerper et al. 1996:5). Georgia Lee (1981:50) correctly recognized that such spike-shaped artifacts are phallic representations.

Not surprisingly, spikes have been found in direct association with those dimorphic sexual symbols known variously as "bird stones," "pelican stones," and "hook stones" (see Koerper and Labbé 1987, 1989; Koerper et al. 1995). Two spikes were found cached together with a "birdstone" (Fig. 6) at the Corona del Mar site (Anon. 1938a; Winterbourne 1967:20-21), and

at a village site in Pacific Palisades, numerous spikes occurred with numerous birdstones (Fig. 7) (Wallace 1987). Not all miniature pestle-like artifacts exhibit the knobbed stylistic convention, including one of the two specimens from Corona del Mar. At CA-ORA-365, several miniature pestles without knobs, a knob fragment, a small pestle remarkable for its phallic naturalism, and a small bird stone had all been cached within a ball of clay (N. Whitney-Desautels, personal communication 1997).

When phallic imagery develops from pestles, mortars evoke, *ipso facto*, vulvar imagery. Further abetting the symbolic intent are those cowry inlays that are set into the rims of mortars. The artifacts' decorative purpose is a feminizing one. Fernando Librado, in recalling a large mortar bearing "half cowry" inlays, informed J. P. Harrington that "the teeth of the cowries were fixed inside the mortar" (Hudson and Blackburn

1983:110), that is, positioned toward the inner edge of the opening. Librado's statement obliquely observes anatomical correctness.

All three "half cowry" inlays illustrated in Figure 1c-e are manufactured from the outer lip of a cowry. Certainly, for inlay work, the outer lip is better suited to represent a vulvar schematic than the columella side of the shell base. To begin, the curve of the outer lip offers a somewhat better fit to the curve of a mortar or bowl rim, and so positioned, the labial teeth face the inner margin of a rim. Thus, the exposed surface of the outer lip inlay mounds upward while the trough-like morphology of its opposite surface adheres to the mortar or bowl rim and is not seen.

The author is familiar with no example of a columella cowry inlay from southern California archaeology. Fashioning an inlay out of the columella yields an inlay whose curvature, if concentrically set to the sweep of a mortar or bowl rim, would necessitate that the columellar teeth be positioned toward the outer margin of the rim, thereby grotesquely violating nature's design for the vulva.

Is there evidence, more direct, to support the idea that cowry shells were equated with vulvas? In his inquiries to Anastacia de Mejal regarding the subject of cowries, Harrington inserted the note that the Juaneño woman did not know the "name that resembles word for cunt" (1986:Rl. 116, Fr. 49). This suggests either that Harrington had elicited from a Native person or persons the notion that the shell and the human anatomy were somehow connected, or he understood the root word was the same for each, or both. The Luiseño root word for cowry is the same for vagina (Eric De Vries, personal communication 2001). More telling is a note that Bernardo Cueda gave the Luiseño name for the cowry shell after Harrington told him that the Mohave call it the "cunt shell" (Harrington 1986:Rl. 116, Fr. 61).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Pierre Gravel (1995:57) notes that in preliterate and ancient cultures "an extraordinarily large number of fertility symbols

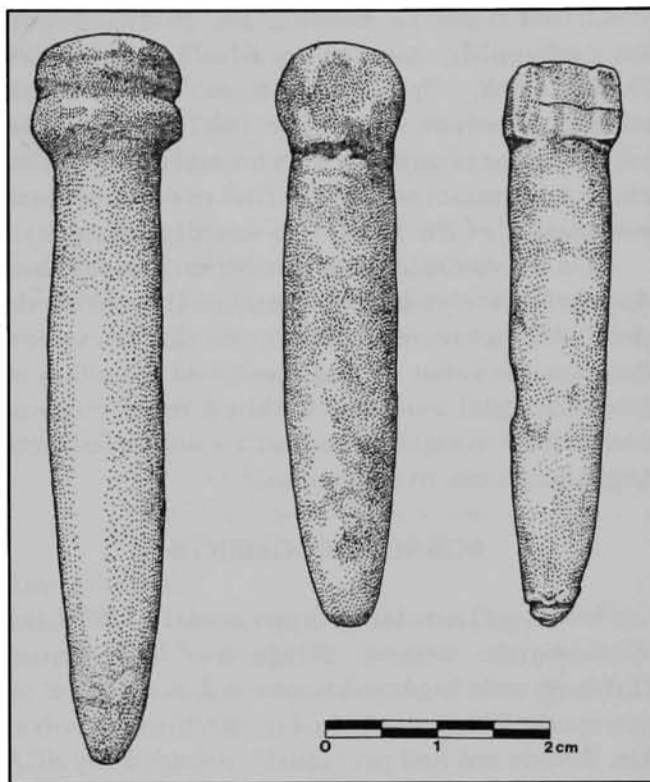


Figure 7. Three of 29 phallic spikes recovered in Pacific Palisades along with 22 "pelican stones." (after Wallace 1987:48).

are of a double nature [male and female]." He writes:

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 *phallos* (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 [1995:56].

The pestle-mortar/bowl combination, as vehicle for merging phallic and vulvar motifs, can be subsumed within a greater southern California list of dualistic sexual symbols that includes juxtapositions of yonis and lingams (McGowan

1982:16-17; Begole 1984:22-23, 26-27) as well as dimorphic sexual symbols known as "birdstones," "pelican stones," and "hook stones" (Koerper and Labbé 1987, 1989). The employment of cowry insets on mortar and bowl rims is consistent with the cross-cultural association of the shell with fertility/fecundity.

It is axiomatic in archaeology that past mindset reconstruction yields more grudgingly to analysis than, say, diet reconstruction. Yet this discussion demonstrates that through judicious handling of circumstantial evidence within a cross-cultural perspective, insights into past mental constructs might be productively explored.

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