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Title

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Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 24(2)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

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Publication Date

2004

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A Unique Artifact Type From Rancho Attilio, Ventura County

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An unusual and previously unreported artifact type was discovered during mitigation-mandated monitoring on 67 acres of Rancho Attilio. In 1987, Wittenberg-Livingston, developers from Newport Beach, California, purchased 117 acres of Rancho Attilio, a citrus and avocado ranch located in the Saticoy area of Ventura County's City of San Buenaventura. Portions of this property were originally acquired in 1886 by Baptista Vanoni, and over the years, the family continued to add to their holdings. I was retained by the developers to provide an archaeological assessment (Lopez:1987) of the property to aid in formulating their future developmental proposals.

An initial investigation determined that the property contained four recorded archaeological resources: Ca-Ven-31, 32, 33, and 34; Ca-Ven-31/56-000031 covered an area of roughly one acre located in a cut within the steep bank of a former river terrace, which was reported to contain the pre-Contact rancheria of Sa'aqtik'oy. This name means "place sheltered from the wind", which makes sense when you realize that the steep banks that once surrounded three sides of this village were at least twenty feet high, thus providing excellent protection from the Santa Ana winds which dominate in the region. No scientific investigation was ever made of this site; however, in time it became part of a 4.47 acre preservation area established by the developers.

Ca-Ven-32/56-000032 covered an area of approximately 2.5 acres, and was formerly

covered by a three-foot-high mound. In 1954, the Vanoni family leveled the mound while converting their agricultural activities from walnuts to citrus; most of the soil went to fill in the village site (Ven-31) but they also moved soil to various other locations within the ranch where they needed to either check erosion channels, fill in low spots, or level areas for better drainage. When they were moving the mound, they reported seeing parts of human skeletons and numerous large artifacts; they did not stop grading, but they did call various public agencies and area universities in an attempt to get someone to check what they were finding. Only Charles Rozaire (1985), at the time a graduate student in archaeology at the University of California at Los Angeles, visited the site on weekends and recorded some of the finds; no official report was ever published on this activity. However, Rozaire's efforts did result in the recording of all four site locations on the property and the compiling of a partial list of the finds. The soil and materials from the mound mostly went to fill in the village site and other locations on the property. In time, the developers also set the mound area aside as an addition to the preservation area.

Ca-Ven-33/56-000033 was discovered in 1933. While putting in an irrigation system for walnuts, the Vanonis exposed an area just east of their house which contained a cache of metates and other types of grinding implements. The event was widely recorded in the local newspapers; and the items first went on display at the Ventura County Fair and then were given to the local county museum. No scientific investigation was ever made of this site, and over the years much of the collection was lost.

Ca-Ven-34/56-000034 was discovered in 1954. While removing the burial mound, the Vanonis also hit a second cache of ground stone implements. The Vanonis did not give this collection to the Ventura County Museum, but kept it and decorated their yard with the large grinding tools. Other than some brief notes made

by Dr. Charles Rozaire, no inventory or scientific investigation was ever made of this site, and over the years much of this collection was also lost.

The second fact that my assessment determined was that there were abundant surface indications of archaeological resources, namely shell fragments, lithic and bone waste, beads and projectile points, as well as an occasional ground stone implement, all over the surface of the 67 acres surrounding the Vanoni's home place. However, test excavations showed that there were no subsurface components for these surface indications (Lopez 1986, 1995).

Based in part on these initial assessments, the City of San Buenaventura Planning Department called for a formal Phase I archaeological reconnaissance of the 67.6 acres proposed for development. The report produced by Mary Maki and Larry Carbone (1998) confirmed the previous archaeological assessment, and recommended a Phase II exploration to determine whether there were or were not any subsurface components (Maki et al. 1999). These two studies confirmed and substantiated all previous assertions about the archaeological aspects of the property, and although it was felt that no intact middens remained, it was recommended that archaeological and Native American monitors be present during all initial earth disturbance activities to collect random artifacts and to protect any unexpected intact midden which might be encountered.

In 2000, Wittenberg-Livingston retired from development and sold the property to Archstone Communities, who in turn sought bids for the archaeological and Native American monitoring components of their proposed project. Having recently retired from teaching at Moorpark College, I bid and got the project and was joined by Carol Pulido, a Native American monitor, one of whose family lineages descends from this village. At various times during this project I called in the assistance of archaeological monitors Glen Higgins, Jon Standley, Merle Hamilton and Matthew Conrad.

On October 29, 2003, Glen Higgins, Merle Hamilton, and myself were working with thirteen graders (Caterpillar 637C). We had about five

minutes to walk a grading alley between passes. On this particular day we were working in an area that had been previously identified as either a small canyon or a short drainage that had been filled in at the time of the removal of the mound in 1954 (Johnson 1982; Vanoni 1995, 2003). At approximately two feet below the surface we began to see dark black brown clay, which we had come to associate with this event since we usually encountered artifacts in it. Eventually, in the general vicinity, we collected fifteen metates, forty manos, six pestles, and four hammerstones; almost everything showed evidence of previous disturbance. Some of the items were intact, but most were broken or scarred fragments of whole items. Glen Higgins reached down to pick up a particularly nice biface mano and noticed under it a regular pattern of bumps; in exposing the area discussed above, he found the largest of the three items, then immediately to one side and slightly below it, he noticed a second similar item. When the second item was removed, he noted a third and smaller item located between and slightly below the other two. We began calling them 'turtles,' based on their shape and so far the name has stuck.

The item in Figure 1, the largest of the three

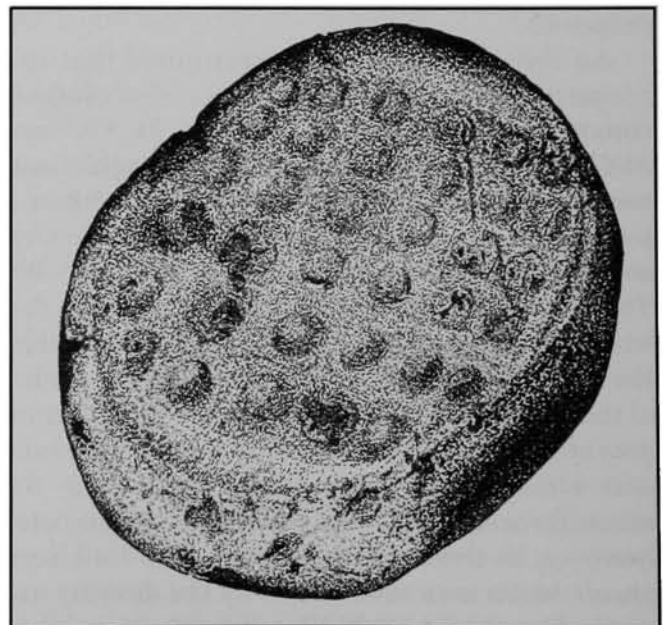


Fig. 1. Large Turtle.

'turtles,' is shaped roughly like an oblong sphere. It is 22.5 cm. long by 17 cm. wide, stands 12 cm. at its highest point, and weighs 4.002 kg.¹ The material is a speckled green serpentine. The closest known source for this type of material is near Figueroa Mountain in the San Raphael Primitive Area of Santa Barbara County. The bottom is smooth with a slight crest or imperfection in one quadrant; it also has seven small scars, probably from past equipment or shovel strikes. The upper edge has a small lip or ridge, which has on one side what appears to be an old scar, and on the other side two recent scars. The ridge is very slight around the outer edge and is slightly turned in at each end. Across the top and within the outer ridge are 35 small bumps; each is about 1.5 cm. in circumference and less than 0.5 cm. in height. The bumps are arranged in six rows; the first has only five bumps, while all others have six. If you turn the figure ninety degrees to the left, this same pattern is repeated in the same way. There is a scratch mark, which begins at the larger of the new hits on the edge, then proceeds across four of the rows. Beginning at the edge of row four, the scratch has broken through the center of one bump, proceeds through the edge of a bump on row three, and then goes between two bumps in row two and proceeds through the edge of a bump in row one. The old scar on the edge lines up with a broken bump in row three.

The medium sized turtle (Fig. 2) is shaped somewhat like a rounded rectangle. It is 18 cm long by 14.5 cm. wide, stands 9 cm. at its highest point and weighs three kilograms. The bottom is slightly rounded and perfectly smooth. The two ends are flatter on this turtle, and thus its appearance is most similar to a turtle with its head and feet drawn in. The front of the turtle has a large flat surface with what appears to be an old scar near one edge. The upper rim is similar to that of the large turtle in that it has evidence of an old and a new strike and it is similarly ridged. On the top there are sixteen bumps arranged in four rows of four, each of which is approximately two centimeters in circumference and less than 0.5 cm. in height. If this object could be unequivocally assigned to

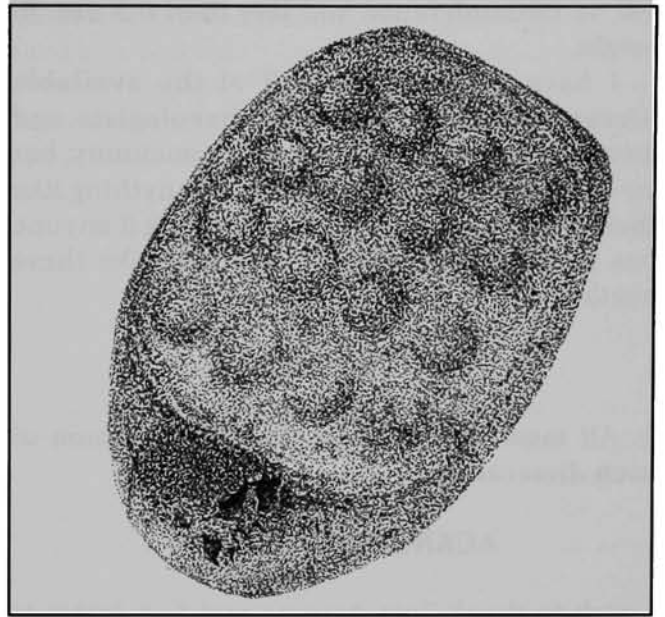


Fig. 2. Medium Turtle.

the Chumash, one might be able to relate it to their preference for a base four number system (Beeler:1986).

The smallest turtle (Fig. 3) is somewhat triangular in shape. It is 15 cm. long by 11.2 cm. wide, stands 4.5 cm. at its highest point and weighs 1.002 kg. The bottom is slightly rounded and smooth, and in the lower quadrant there is a 1.5 by 4 cm. area which is slightly depressed and shows a higher degree of polish than that on the rest of the back. The outer edge has two old scars, and unlike the others, no edge ridge. On the top there are twenty bumps arranged in five rows of four; each bump is approximately one

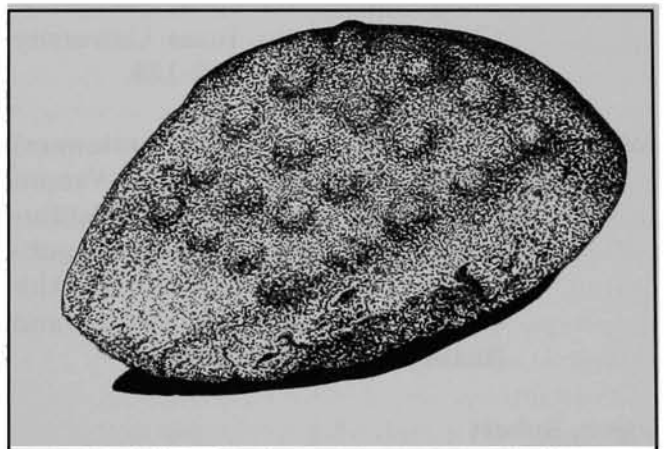


Fig.3. Small Turtle.

cm. in circumference and less than 0.5 cm. in height.

I have gone through all of the available literature and spoken to archaeologists and members of the Native American community, but no one has ever seen nor heard of anything like these particular artifacts. I am asking if anyone has ever seen or heard of anything like these 'turtles,' and if so, when and where?

NOTES

1. All measurements are for the maximum of each dimension.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Tom Antoine and Ken Jeters of W.E. O'Neil Construction Company for their consideration and cooperation during this project, and Glen Higgins, archaeological monitor, for his quick action in the face of eminent danger from furious 637Cs. A special thanks to Jon Standley (ibdign@vcnet.com) for the excellent illustrations. Finally, thanks to all the members of the archaeological and Native American communities whom I have bugged with my inquiries.

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