

## **UC Merced**

### **Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology**

**Title**

The Santa Barbara Indians

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7kf9x6fw>

**Journal**

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 29(2)

**ISSN**

0191-3557

**Author**

Bowers, Rev. Stephen

**Publication Date**

2009

Peer reviewed

## LOST AND FOUND

---

*During the course of his pioneering involvement with California archaeology, Stephen Bowers wrote a number of briefessays (in often somewhat obscure venues) on the prehistory and Native American inhabitants of the Santa Barbara region. These essays can occasionally seem repetitious to the modern reader, since Bowers was fond of using particular phrases or even entire paragraphs more than once, and the same wording and examples can be found in various combinations in manuscripts often separated by many years. The unpublished manuscript presented here (which was written in 1897, well after Bowers' period of active involvement in archaeology) is no exception, in that it contains some of the same material found in other, recently published Bowers writings (see particularly Appendix B of Arlene Benson's *The Noontide Sun: The Field Journals of the Reverend Stephen Bowers, Pioneer California Archaeologist* [Ballena Press, 1997]). However, it also contains previously unpublished information that is unique, significant, and still germane to contemporary discussions of Chumash social organization. The manuscript (Southwest Museum Ms. 532, Folder 19) is reproduced here through the courtesy of the Braun Research Library, Autrey National Center of the American West, Los Angeles.*

### **The Santa Barbara Indians**

#### **Rev. Stephen Bowers**

On a map showing the distribution of the Indian tribes of California, Major Powell divided them into nineteen families. The Santa Barbara Indians inhabited the territory now included in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. The territory embraced in Los Angeles, Orange, and portions of some other counties was inhabited by Shoshonean Indians, while that of the Yokuts extended as far south as Fort Tejon. The islands of San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, and Anacapa are assigned by Powell to the Santa Barbara [Chumashan] family; and San Nicolas, Santa Barbara, San Clemente, and Santa Catalina islands to Shoshoneans.

Owing probably to an exceedingly genial and healthful climate, and to abundant sources of food, the Santa Barbara Indians were a populous family as the great number of rancherias, shell heaps, and burial places seem to conclusively prove. Between Point Mugu, about 50 miles west of Santa Monica, and Point Conception, a distance of 100 miles, I have explored the sites of about one hundred old Indian settlements; and on the Santa Ynez River, which runs nearly parallel with the shoreline of the Pacific Ocean, about thirty more. The islands also are covered with shell heaps; some of them, extending over hundreds of acres, are many feet deep.

In the year 1542, half a century after Columbus discovered America, Juan Rodriguez de Cabrillo, a Portuguese navigator in the employ of Spain, discovered the coast of Alta California. On October 7 he landed on San Miguel, the group westerly of the Channel Islands, naming these San Lucas. Cabrillo wintered here and on the mainland.

Cabrillo informs us that one day while his vessels were anchored at the present site of Ventura, two Indians came on board, and beginning with that place, which they called Xuco, they pointed out twenty-five Indian settlements which they named as follows: Bis, Sopono, Alloc, Xabaagua, Xotococ, Potoltuc, Nacbuc, Quelqueme, Misinagua, Misesopano, Elquis, Coloc, Mugu, Xagua, Anacbuc, Partocac, Susuquey, Quanmu, Gua, Asimu, Aguin, Casalic, Tucum, and Incuppu. Cabrillo named the place where his ships anchored, De los Canoas, or Canoe Town, because of the great number of canoes owned by the natives. He says the towns were located on rich alluvial plains where there was much timber. The natives were dressed in skins and wore long hair. On the islands their hair was intertwined with cords and ornamented with finely wrought arrowheads. On the mainland they had plenty of food. They raised a sort of maize which they saturated in stone mortars and made into dumplings. Elk and antelope were abundant; the former they called Cac. Cabrillo says there were several different languages spoken between Xucu and Point Conception, and wars were not infrequent between tribes.

In the Miocene age of geology this coast was doubtless greatly disturbed by frequent seismic

oscillations, which probably extended from Alaska to South America. In one of these disturbances the Santa Barbara Channel islands were raised above the ocean. They are principally composed of basaltic rocks. I have traced this uplift and lava flow from San Miguel Island to Yuma, and into Mexico. It left an elevated ridge from the last-named island to Point Mugu, connecting with the mainland, and an arm of the sea 100 miles long reached down to the latter place from Point Conception, or Cape Galera as Cabrillo named that point of land. The frequent elevations and depressions to which this coast has been subjected during the long ages that have intervened since this ridge of land was thrown up, has left four disconnected spots of land, the other portions having fallen prey to the action of the ever-restless waves. Not only are the rock formations of these islands the same as those found on the mainland, but the fossils are similar. On Santa Rosa Island I found the remains of the mastodon. These islands were probably once much larger than now, and capable of supporting animal life even in its largest forms.

Beginning at the eastern end of this group, the first is Anacapa. The Indians called it En-nce-ah-pagh. It is a narrow strip of basaltic rocks about five miles long, partly covered with soil. The remains of a large rancheria shows that it was once inhabited. Santa Cruz, the second in the line, is the largest of these islands. It lies "broad off the coast" and opposite the city of Santa Barbara. Its longer axis is twenty-two and a half miles, and it has an average width of about four miles. The Indian name for this island was Limu. Santa Rosa, the third island in the group, was called by the natives Ni-cal-que. Its general shape is that of a parallelogram. It is about sixteen miles long and twelve miles wide. San Miguel, the most westerly of these islands, is about seven by three miles in extent and is triangular in shape. The Indian name for this island was Cig-ui-mu-y-mu.

As intimated, these islands were once inhabited by populous tribes, as hundreds of old rancherias, and great numbers of their implements manufactured from stone, bones, and shells, and other articles of their handiwork, indicate. The vast accumulations of shells, the bones of fishes, seals, sea-lions, sea-otters, whales, porpoises, and other animals are almost beyond belief.

Santa Rosa was the first of the islands I explored. I spent a month on this island and secured about one

ton of relics for the Government. They differed but little from the Indian remains found on the mainland, except the perforated disks. These varied in size from one to five or six inches in diameter, and while plentiful upon the islands, are seldom found, as far as I know, on the mainland. An Indian in my employ, while exploiting San Miguel Island, informed me that these disks were used in games. It required three or more to play the game. Two persons standing at a given distance from each other rolled the disk rapidly between them and a third person endeavored to catch it upon a long, pointed stick. I was told by another Indian that some of these perforated disks were used as weights for digging-sticks. Both statements are probably true; but some of them must have been used for other purposes, for they are neither round nor square, and are very highly polished. I secured a find of these implements from a cave in the San Martin Mountains in Ventura County containing wooden handles fastened into the disks with asphaltum cement and were doubtless used in their religious ceremonies, as they were accompanied by a large number of bone flutes or whistles.

When the order came to proceed to San Miguel Island, several months later, it was very much to my liking, as several parties had undertaken its exploitation but were driven back by prevailing winds and sandstorms. A Government vessel was placed at our service and we landed at Cuyler Harbor where Cabrillo's ships had anchored 335 years previously. The wind was blowing a gale and the breakers were running high, and our landing by aid of the life-boats was attended with difficulty and danger. On the shore we were confronted by a merciless sandstorm, in the face of which we were compelled to carry our blankets and provisions to the summit of a sand-dune 350 feet high, where we found shelter in an old building that had formerly been occupied by sheep-herders. Here we made headquarters for ten days and had the satisfaction of exploring every portion of the island despite the warring elements. This island yielded many interesting remains of the race who once inhabited it. They excelled as artificers in stone, especially in chipped implements; chalcedony, chert, jasper, quartz, etc., were finely wrought into arrowheads, knives, tattooing implements, hair pendants, etc.

The method of manufacturing arrowheads has probably been the same the world over. In his work on

Mycenae and Troy, Schliemann figures a large number of obsidian arrowheads which he thinks were deposited in the tombs some 2,500 years ago. He says, "Nothing could give a better idea of the great antiquity of these tombs than these stone arrowheads, for the Iliad seems to know only arrowheads of bronze." When I sent him drawings of arrowheads from the burial places of the Santa Barbara Indians corresponding perfectly in material and shape with those he found in the fourth sepulcher at Mycenae, he wrote me expressing his astonishment.

Joseph Shangarata, a Christianized chief in Oregon who distinctly remembered the stone age of his tribe, was the first to explain to me the method of this manufacture. This was in 1873, and a year or two later I visited a tribe at Clear Lake, California, who had not yet fully emerged from the stone age. They called themselves Alemvas, and one old man was an adept at making arrow- and spear-points. After selecting a flake of obsidian, he drew a piece of skin or leather over the palm of his left hand, upon which he laid the mineral that he designed to fashion into a spear-point. He then took a bone or portion of a deer's antler ground to a point and with this chipped the flake of obsidian into a beautiful implement with notched base and serrated edges. He did it very dexterously by a sort of lateral pressure, and seemed to accomplish it with ease.

Before leaving San Miguel Island, Cabrillo met with an accident which dislocated his shoulder, and soon afterward caused his death. His body was brought back to the island; and here "where breakers roar and fearful tempests gather" the remains of the adventurous navigator were laid to rest. I looked in vain for his grave. It is probably located near the harbor where his ships anchored and is now covered with hundreds of feet of drifting sand.

Santa Cruz Island was next explored. Spain once planted a penal colony here, but the prisoners constructed a raft and made their escape to the mainland, twenty-five miles distant. It is said that their descendants still live in Santa Barbara County. I reached the island in a Government steamer and divided my party into two sections. My personal exploitations were confined to the western portion of the island, which, before reaching, we had to cross a chain of mountains more than 2,000 feet high. Along the shoreline we found a rich field which yielded many fine specimens to enrich the National Museum.

But most of my explorations were on the mainland. When exploring the Santa Ynez River and its tributaries in 1877, an old Indian of the Santa Barbara stock was still living though more than a hundred years old. I was informed that the baptismal records of the Santa Barbara Mission confirmed his great age. Here a powerful tribe of Indians once lived, which this old man distinctly remembered. They were known by the name of Kal-awa-saw and had abandoned this spot in about the year 1807. As the specimens found here were generally typical, I will briefly describe them.

There were twenty-eight sandstone mortars holding from two quarts to more than two bushels; they were finely wrought, the larger ones having a sort of rim or flange at the top by which to grasp the vessel in removing it. There were forty-four pestles accompanying the mortars, measuring from a few inches to more than two feet in length, made from sandstone, polished and ornamented. They showed great variety in finish, no two being exactly similar. We found twenty ollas carved from steatite or crystallized talc. They would usually hold from one to three or four gallons. They were made from solid blocks of this mineral and some of them were almost as perfect as if turned on a lathe. The mineral from which they were carved has been traced to Santa Catalina Island. This burial place also yielded forty-four cups or bowls made principally from serpentine. Some had handles, and nearly all bore evidence of fine workmanship. We found twenty-six pipes made in conical form and measuring from four to twelve inches in length. A mouthpiece of bone was inserted in the smaller end and cemented with asphaltum. Most of these pipes were highly polished. They were carved from serpentine, talc, mica schist, etc.

The place yielded twenty spear- and arrowheads of chert, finely wrought. There were also arrow-smoothers, tortilla stones, chert knives and drills, bone whistles, a copper spear, charms and tubes of stone, balls of war paint, and at least a half-bushel of beads, wampum, and ornaments in shell, bone, and stone, a description of which would require a whole volume. In this burial place I found a silver coin dating back to 1745.

Polychrome beads were not infrequently found in the graves, and other glass beads which have been traced to Venice. These were doubtless procured from the early Spanish voyagers and traders.

In the exhumation of probably five or six thousand skeletons, I found but one method of burial. The body had been drawn as near as possible into the shape of a ball with the knees against the chest and buried face downward. A place was usually selected within the limits of the village and bodies were buried one above another until sometimes several hundred would occupy the radius of but a few feet. Sometimes the bodies of infants had been placed in ollas and mortars and the tops covered with flat stones. It was common to find human bones inside these vessels, and in many instances they must have been after-burials. The earthly effects of the individual had been buried with the body, but everything except the harder substances had decayed. Around the neck of Chief Sisquoc I found forty-two shell disks made from the large clam known as *Pachydesma crassatelloides*. They must have weighed several pounds.

It was not uncommon to find bones that had been broken and knit again. Others showed the effect of disease. Teeth were often decayed and in some instances but one or two remained at death in the case of very old people. The stoutness of the bones and the markings of the muscular attachments denoted great physical strength, and a somewhat hardy race, yet many died young. These early deaths may have been the result of contagious diseases, however, especially after they came in contact with the whites. The skulls differed little from that of existing Indian tribes in this state, the facial angle denoting ordinary aboriginal intelligence. At Point Rincon I found a perforated skull. It was that of an old person and was in a semi-fossil state. The perforation was at the apex of the skull and was evidently made a considerable time before death. The aperture was about three-eighths of an inch in size. In a burial place on the Santa Ynez River occurred crania closely resembling the Aztec race. The skeletons were small, and some of the utensils buried with them were somewhat unique.

[*Several sentences discussing cranial characteristics from a somewhat biased perspective have been omitted here.*] In some instances I found the temporal spheroid and other bones penetrated by arrowheads, indicating the manner in which they came to their death. The teeth were often irregularly set in the jaws, and not infrequently one or two, and possibly three, extra teeth occurred. In many cases the teeth were worn down low and presented the appearance of double teeth all around the jaw.

Evidently the territory of which I have been speaking had been inhabited for many centuries. In some instances the lower burials were from seven to nine feet below the surface, and the bones reduced to an impalpable dust. Only the stone implements remained. [*Several sentences describing the state of preservation of human remains in Greece and Egypt have been omitted here.*] Then what shall we say of the bones of the natives of this coast buried in an antiseptic soil and yet turned to dust? While I am not giving them the high antiquity of forty-five centuries, yet I think it fair to conclude that the first burials occurred in some of these places many centuries ago.

The last survivor of the Santa Rosa islanders was living in Santa Barbara County a few years ago. Dr. Ord, a brother of Major General Ord, U.S. Army, favored me with a written account of an interview he had with this man. His name was Omset, and he had left the island with the small remnant of his people some sixty years previously or about the year 1816. Omset said his people were idolaters, and that they worshipped the sun, the swordfish, and the raven. They worshipped the sun because it gave them light and warmth; the swordfish (which they called *orca* or killer) because it killed the whale which, floating ashore, furnished them food. The worship of the raven by these people is also mentioned by the historian of Cabrillo's expedition, but their object in worshipping it is not clear. It is still abundant on the islands and is very tame. Padre de la Ascension, who accompanied the expedition of Viscaino in 1602, describes a temple that the Santa Catalina islanders erected to the sun and says it contained both images and idols.

Omset represented his tribe as very numerous previous to the advent of the Spaniards. He said, "The men were stout, well-built, and good swimmers." They ate their food uncooked.

With an item or two more I must close this paper, which already is becoming too long. Six or seven years ago, in company with Juan Pico, an intelligent Indian then living in Ventura, I visited Point Mugu, the southeastern corner of Ventura County. Here once lived several powerful tribes, as extensive rancherias, which I had previously explored, indicated. Much valuable information concerning these tribes had been handed down by Pico's ancestors, which he gave to me as follows. They were called Mugu Indians, which was a general rather than a specific name. Here lived a great chief or king whose authority

extended to Point Conception one hundred miles up the coast, and to Newhall and San Fernando eastwardly. The chief of each town or tribe was a petty king but subject to the Mugu rule. The town where the great chief lived was near a large spring of water which rises at the base of a basaltic hill two miles from the ocean, and bordering the Santa Clara Valley. Here meetings of all the tribes were held once in five years to pass laws and transact business pertaining to the numerous tribes of the district. When the time drew near for the meeting, two men were sent to notify the nearest tribe of the time fixed upon by the great chief for the national gathering. The tribe visited by these men notified the next, and they a third, each informing his nearest neighbors of the contemplated meeting until all were notified. Each tribe started at a time that would bring them to Mugu on a certain day. When they came in sight of the capital they announced their presence by fire and smoke signals. Seeing these signals the king, accompanied by some of his chief men, would go out to meet them, sending two or three men in advance, and on the arrival of the tribe they were accompanied into the town with music, singing, and dancing, and assigned to their place during the gathering.

When the tribes or their representatives were all assembled, dancing and feasting began, which continued for five days, at the close of which the chiefs of each tribe were called into council for the space of three days, when they would be dismissed. The Mugus provided food for all their visitors during the first eight days, but after the expiration of that time, if any desired to remain, they must provide food for themselves. The ocean being near and fish and clams abundant, this was not hard to do.

In this central tribe the language was supposed to be preserved in its purity, and whatever dialects the others might speak, the Mugu was the language in which the council was conducted; and it was the mother language which all must learn. Pico says it had an alphabet of twenty-two letters or signs and at their quintennial gathering the language of their ancestors was carefully considered and kept intact. It was exceedingly condensed, and the words were very expressive. For illustration, the word corresponding to our word 'fall' might mean that a person fell on his hands, or his head, or his feet, or his shoulders, or his side; that the fall hurt him slightly, crippled him, killed him, or was harmless, simply by the accentuation and inflection.

Incontinency on the part of the married was punished by death. They were shot to death with arrows, after which their bodies were burned. A Mugu Indian married a Tejon woman who went with her husband to live at the capital of the Mugu natives. She proved unfaithful to her spouse; when her parents were sent for to witness her execution, they refused to come. They were sent for a second and a third time, and still refusing, the Tejon tribe sent word that the killing of the woman would be taken as a declaration of war. But the man and woman were killed and their bodies were burned according to the laws and customs of the Santa Barbara Indians. Four hundred Tejon Indians at once set out to avenge the death of the woman by punishing the Mugu people; but in the encounter they were badly defeated and left about seventy of their dead on the field while the Mugu's lost but two or three of their number. Pico pointed out the place, which was on the Santa Clara plains.

They did not scalp their victims, but their method was to cut off one of the hands of each one slain and preserve it as a trophy. Feasting and dancing continued for as many days as there were hands cut off and brought in. The Mugu Indians abandoned this rancheria and surrounding villages about one hundred years ago and were taken to the mission of San Buenaventura.

Pico said that the Maligo Indians, living about half-way between Point Mugu and Santa Monica, belonged to another nation and were governed by another great chief who lived at that town, but had jurisdiction over the tribes living eastwardly along the coast.

In conclusion: The question naturally arises as to the extermination of the Santa Barbara Indians. Of the nineteen families into which Major Powell divides the Indians of this state, all, as far as I know, have many representatives except the family we have been considering. I doubt if a dozen of their descendants are left to tell the story of their existence.

Various reasons for their disappearance have been assigned. The indications are that the tribes had suffered no diminution in population since Cabrillo's day to the advent of the mission fathers and the Spanish soldiers. The archives of the Santa Barbara Mission show that seventeen villages existed on the islands of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa in 1805, exclusive of the inhabitants of San Miguel Island. Several of these rancherias are represented as containing from 122 to 145 men each.

But averaging the villages at 100 men each, or 400 men, women, and children, the aggregate number could not have been less than about 7,000 on these two islands. But the biennial report of 1824 says, "There are no longer any Indians on the islands."

The old friars of Santa Barbara Mission attributed their decline to the Russians, whom they said visited the islands about the beginning of the last century to obtain the fur of the sea-otter, then very abundant. They brought with them natives of Alaska to whom they had taught the use of firearms, and left them on the islands during the winter months. These fellows amused themselves in the absence of the Russian ships by shooting down the defenseless inhabitants. Another account is that the Russians themselves killed great numbers of the islanders in order to obtain their furs. There is also a tradition of a destructive famine that reduced the inhabitants from several thousands to a few score in number. One of the friars told me that it was infanticide that destroyed this race of Indians.

I cannot vouch for the truthfulness of any of these statements. I have found skulls and bones on the islands that were penetrated by arrowheads, but none that indicated gunshot wounds. On the extreme western portion of Santa Rosa Island I found a large number of skeletons of children, which might indicate a plague of some sort; and on some of the islands may be found the undecayed stumps of trees and millions of dead land-shells, which might indicate a long drought some time in

the past. Still, it is difficult to understand how a famine of food could have occurred as the dwellers on these islands relied for food upon the products of the ocean. There is no evidence that they cultivated the soil in the slightest degree. The old padres of the Santa Barbara Mission make this record concerning their character: "They are very superstitious and have a bad effect on the character of the Mission Indians on the mainland. They come to the mainland in canoes and exchange shell beads with the other Indians for seeds, which with the fish they catch, constitutes their food. The men are entirely naked and the women nearly so, and all are half starved." It is possible that this picture is overdrawn. No doubt that the hardy islanders who ventured across the Santa Barbara Channel in canoes were wild and independent, but their rancherias show that they were well supplied with both implements and food.

There is doubtless some other cause for their disappearance. Santa Rosa Island alone had at least seven villages in 1805, each "containing many Indians" according to the mission records, but about eleven years afterward they had been reduced to probably less than a score on the whole island and were removed to the Purisima mission. Not only the inhabitants of the islands, but also the teeming thousands on the mainland, melted away before another people in less than half a century.

Los Angeles  
June 6, 1897

