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Three Baked Clay Figurines from Antelope Valley, California

MARK Q. SUTTON

During mitigation work undertaken at a small occupation site (LAn-771) on Edwards Air Force Base in 1977 (Sutton 1977, 1978), a small baked clay figurine fragment with a punctate design was recovered. When this piece was shown to R. W. Robinson at Antelope Valley College, he remembered having recovered two similar artifacts during his excavations at Ker-303, a large occupation site about 25 miles west of LAn-771.

This report describes these three artifacts and offers some limited comparisons with other figurines from southern California. These specimens are the first reported fired clay figurines from the Antelope Valley, the southwesternmost part of the Mojave Desert.

The LAn-771 site is located just south of Buckhorn Dry Lake. The site probably dates within the last thousand years and seems to have been abandoned prior to the protohistoric period. The figurine recovered from the site (Fig. 1, lower) is a fragment of a larger piece, being broken at the bottom. It is slightly "S" shaped in profile and comes to a point at the top. It is decorated with a rather systematic pattern of punctate depressions. The depressions were made by sticking a small instrument straight into the clay, leaving a small hole. The piece had been fired and is light tan in color.

Two other figurines were recovered from Ker-303, located in the northwestern part of the valley. This site was excavated by Antelope Valley College in 1972-76. It is a major village site dated by several radiocarbon assays to between 500 B.C. and A.D. 1700 (R. W. Robinson, personal communication).





Fig. 1. Figurine fragments from Ker-303 (upper, center [two views of each]) and LAn-771 (lower). Actual size.

One of the figurines from Ker-303 (Fig. 1, center) is very similar in form and size to the one from LAn-771 discussed above. It is also "S" shaped and pointed at the top, even more so than the one from LAn-771. The piece has punctate depressions but they differ markedly from those on the specimen from LAn-771 in that they were formed by pressing an instrument into the clay at an angle rather than

straight in. The piece was fired and is tan in color.

Exact interpretations of the original form of these specimens are difficult. They may represent zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures, birds, atlatl spurs, or seeds. They look very much like *Amsinckia tessellata* seeds, a cache of which was recovered by Antelope Valley College at Ker-308, a dry cave near Rosamond. Obviously, it is unclear what they were meant to represent.

While the exact form of these figurines has not been reported previously, both variations of rendering the punctations are fairly common. Many of the figurines from the Great Basin show punctations (Ambro 1978; Hunt 1960; Wallace 1965) as do many from other parts of California (Goerke and Davidson 1975; Hedges 1973).

The other figurine fragment recovered from Ker-303 (Fig. 1, upper) is different in form and design from the two discussed above. The piece is flat and rounded on the bottom (which may not be the bottom at all), and resembles a small slab. There is a depression in the center of the artifact and a small hole near the bottom. The depression was made by twice pressing a stick or similar object into the clay at an angle, the second impression almost perpendicular to the first. The area between the two impressions is also slightly depressed. The hole near the bottom was made by pressing an instrument straight into the clay. Like the others, this piece had been fired and is tan in color.

This example is probably a human figurine. It is very similar to human figurines reported by Hedges (1973), Goerke and Davidson (1975), and Wallace (1965). The decoration on the artifact may represent genitals or a navel.

Most of the figurines from southern California have been dated to the last prehistoric period, within the last thousand years, and on into historic time (Hunt 1960; Wallace 1965;

Hedges 1973; Ambro 1978). There are, however, earlier dates on some figurines (Goerke and Davidson 1975; Knight 1973; Drover 1975).

Figurines have been interpreted as having a variety of functions, including use as toys (e.g., Ambro 1978) or as ceremonial objects (e.g., Wallace 1965). Specific associations with the figurines from the Antelope Valley are not sufficient at this time to suggest any specific functional interpretation.

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