

A Charmstone Cache from the Southern San Joaquin Valley

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Abstract

During test excavations at CA-KER-2720 in the southern San Joaquin Valley, an intact cache containing several categories of artifacts was discovered. The cache contained charmstones and stone beads, plus tools that may have been used for the manufacture of such items. The cache and its contents are described and discussed.

Introduction

The CA-KER-2720 site is located along the western side of the Buena Vista Slough west of the town of Buttonwillow (Fig. 1). It was first recorded in January of 1990 and was test excavated between 1990 and 1992. When first recorded, the site consisted of a relatively low (*ca.* 50 cm.) mound of dark-colored soil some 25 meters in diameter. Thus, the site appeared to be relatively small and shallow. The site is located in the “desert” directly adjacent to the slough and the valley floor.

A complete surface collection (224 2 x 2-meter units) was conducted, three 1 x 2-meter test excavation units were placed across the site, and one unit (TU-4; 1 x 1-meter) was placed off-site (66.7 m. south of TU-3) as a control (Fig. 2). The soil of the site consisted primarily of a dark-colored loam containing considerable artifactual materials, along with freshwater mussel (*cf. Anodonta* sp.) and land snail (*Helminthaglyphtha* sp.) shell. Test units 1 and 3 were excavated to sterile soil at a depth of 270 and 260 cm. respectively, much deeper than anticipated. The charmstone cache (Feature 1) was found in the 20 to 30-cm. level of TU-2 and a burial (Feature 2) was discovered in the 70 to 80-cm. level of TU-2 and excavation was discontinued. Unit 4 was excavated to 40 cm. and augered to 90 cm., with no cultural materials being found.

A series of auger holes was excavated on the periphery of the visible surface manifestation of the site (see Fig. 2) in order to discover the horizontal subsurface extent of the site. From those data, it appears that the site is about 45 meters north/south by 35 meters east/west and that the mound had been partly buried by alluvial action since its occupation, with only the central portion remaining visible (Fig. 3).

The artifact assemblage (beads and projectile points) suggests that the upper portion of the site dates from the Late Period (*ca.* after 1,500 B.P.) with the lower strata dating from the Middle Period (*ca.* 3,500 to 1,500 B.P.).

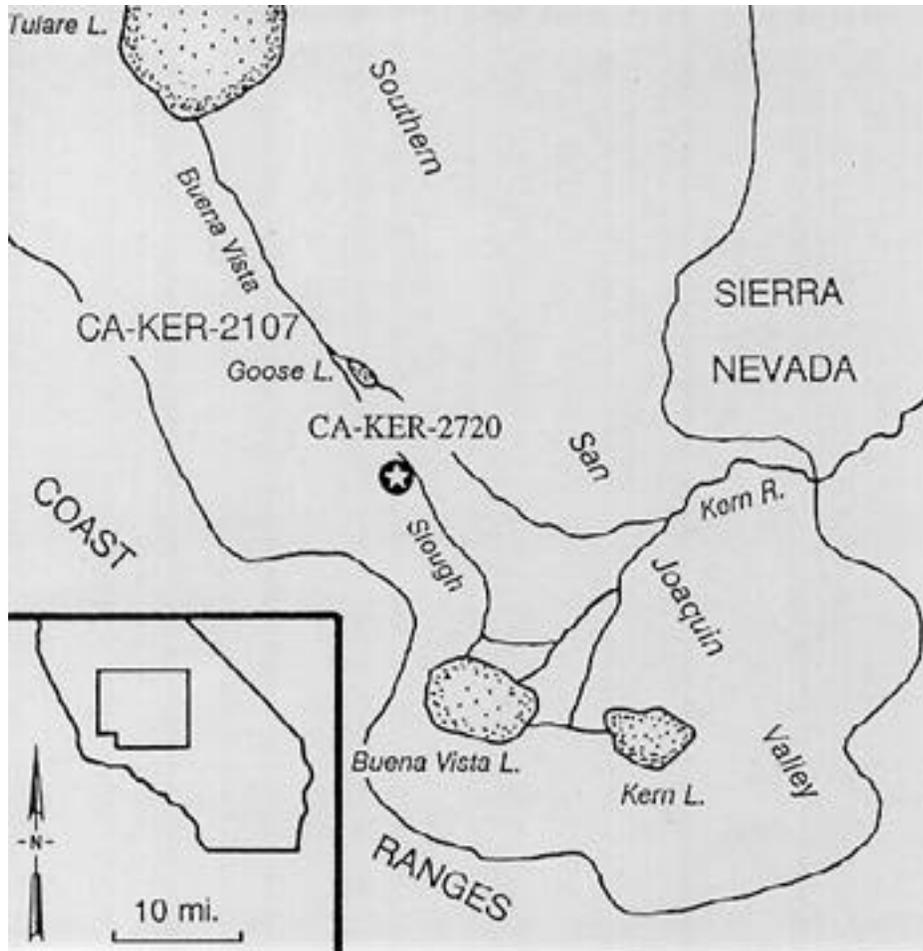


Fig. 1. General location of the CA-KER-2720 site in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

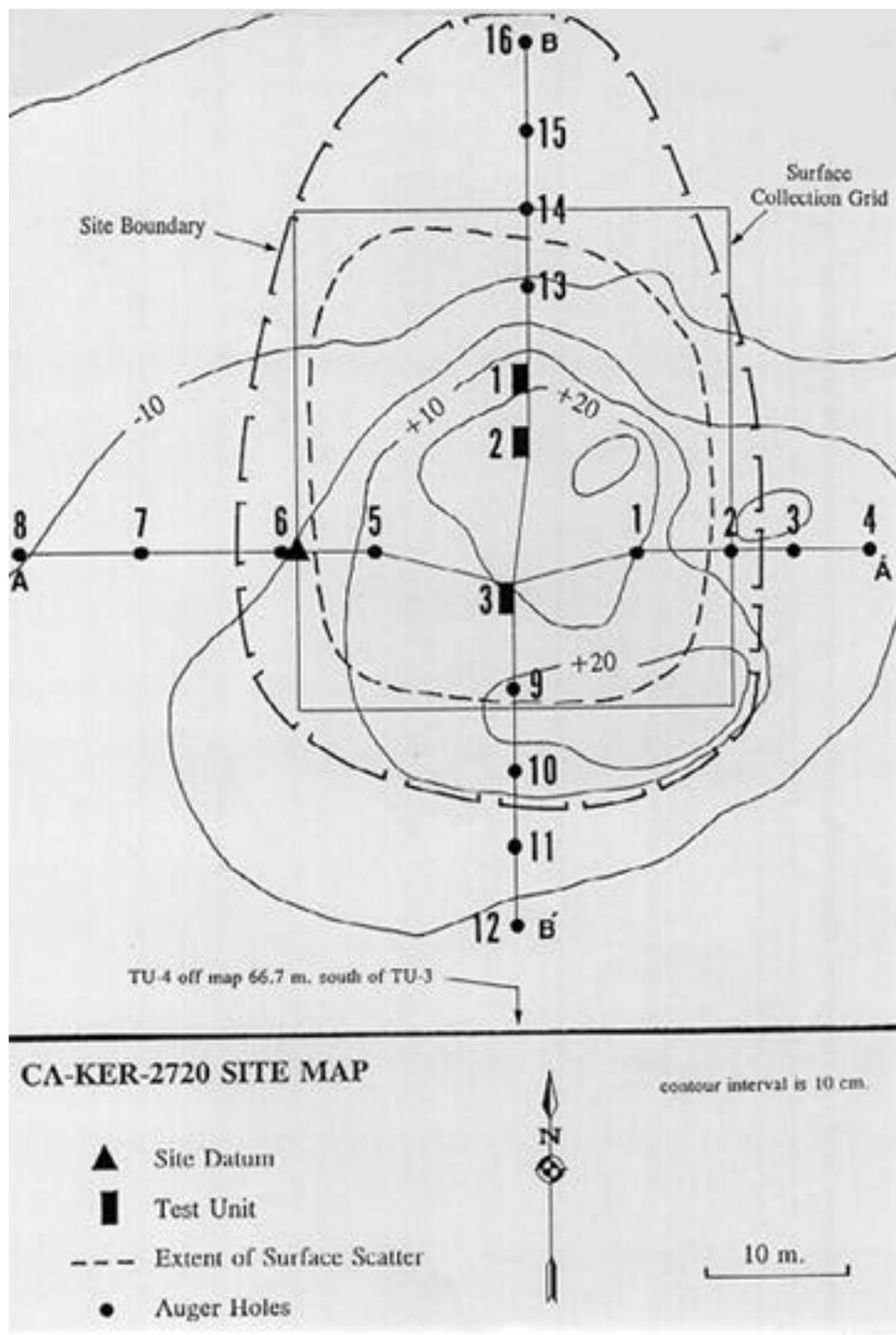


Fig. 2. General map of the CA-KER-2720 site.

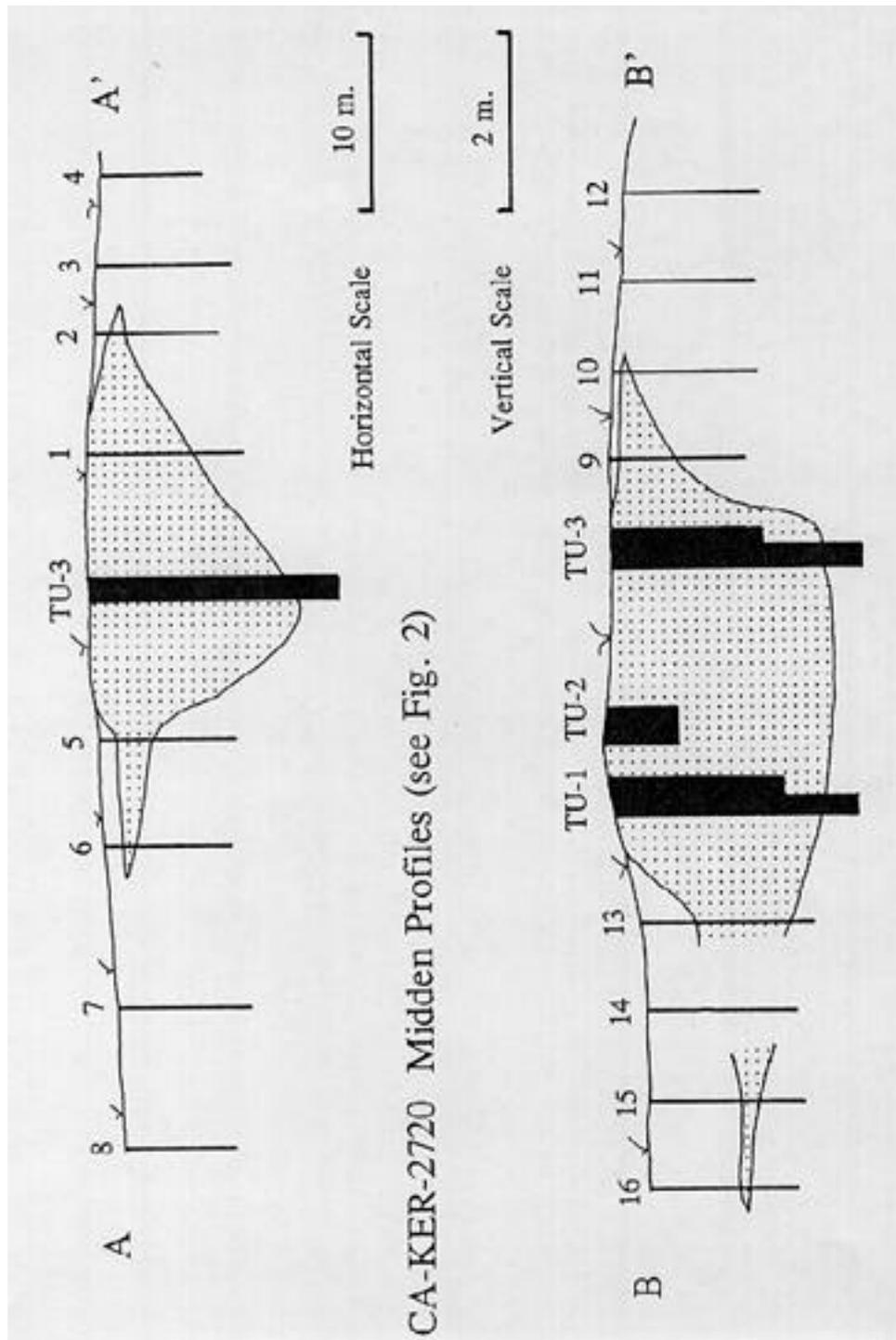


Fig. 3. Profiles (A - A' and B - B', see Fig. 2) of the cultural deposit at CA-KER-2720 (vertical scale exaggerated).

The Cache

A cache (Feature 1; Fig. 4) was discovered in the 20 to 30-cm. level of TU-2 (see Fig. 2). It consisted of a fragmentary slab metate under which were three charmstones, two stone beads, six unshaped, waterworn stones, two hammerstones, three flakes, and a small quantity of *Anodonta* sp. shell. The provenience and attributes of each item are provided in Table 1. No evidence of any container or pit was found.

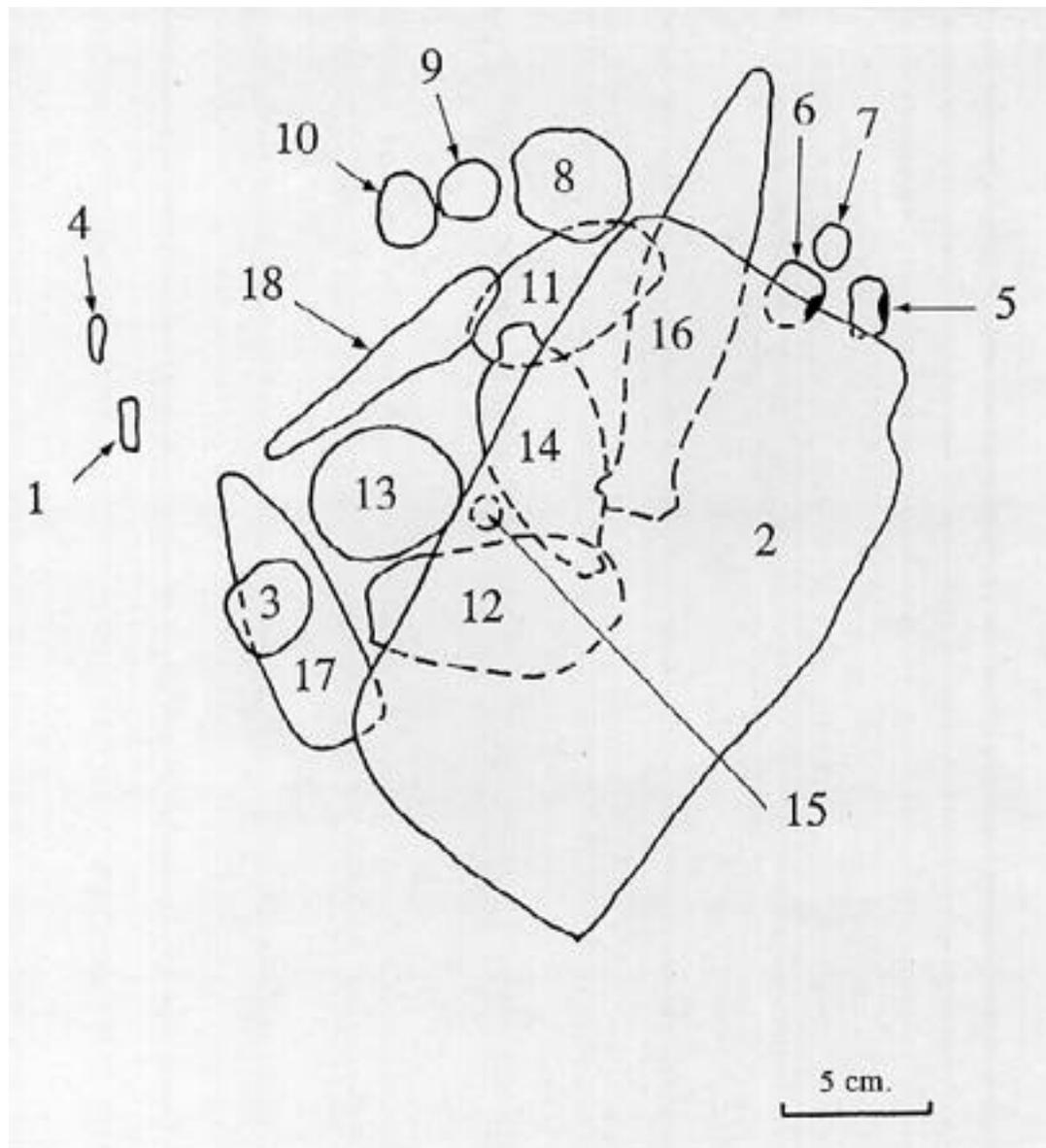


Fig. 4. Map of the cached artifacts from Feature 1, TU-2, CA-KER-2720 (refer to Table 1 for attributes).

Table 1. Provenience and Attributes of Items from Cache (Feature 1), CA-KER-2720

Catalog Number	Item (from Fig. 4)	Item	Material	Length (mm)	Width (mm)	Thickness (mm)	Weight (g)	refer to Fig.
2-031	2	metate fragment	sandstone	214.0	141.0	19.0	1,066.5	5
2-043	14	charmstone	limestone	99.0	43.0	41.0	193.6	6a
2-045	16	charmstone	granitic	155.0	30.0	28.0	180.6	6b
2-046	17	charmstone	granitic	98.0	36.0	35.0	188.8	6c
2-034	5	stone bead	steatite	12.5	17.5	9.0	12.3	7a
2-035	6	stone bead	granitic	19.0	26.0	9.0	15.8	7b
2-037	8	hammerstone	quartzite	40.0	42.0	34.5	98.4	7c
2-041	12	hammerstone	basalt	80.0	45.0	29.0	151.5	7d
2-036	7	spherical stone	quartzite	24.0	20.5	20.0	13.2	
2-038	9	spherical stone	quartzite	20.5	18.0	13.0	6.6	
2-039	10	spherical stone	quartzite	26.0	22.0	14.0	11.7	
2-042	13	spherical stone	quartzite	49.0	40.0	36.0	99.6	
2-040	11	thin cobble	granitic	77.0	45.0	16.0	89.2	8a
2-047	18	thin cobble	granitic	113.0	27.0	27.0	96.7	8b
2-030	1	flake	chert	33.0	16.0	8.5	5.2	
2-033	4	flake	chert	26.0	13.0	5.0	4.3	
2-044	15	flake	chert	28.5	23.5	12.0	10.1	
2-032	3	shell fragments	<i>Anodonta</i>	--	--	--	1.3	

Metate

A single fragment of a greenish sandstone slab metate (Fig. 5) was found overlying the cache. The specimen is slightly burned along its broken (interior) edge. There is some light-colored material adhering to the surface of the metate on one side. It is possible that this is related to use of the item to “grind” other artifacts from the cache.

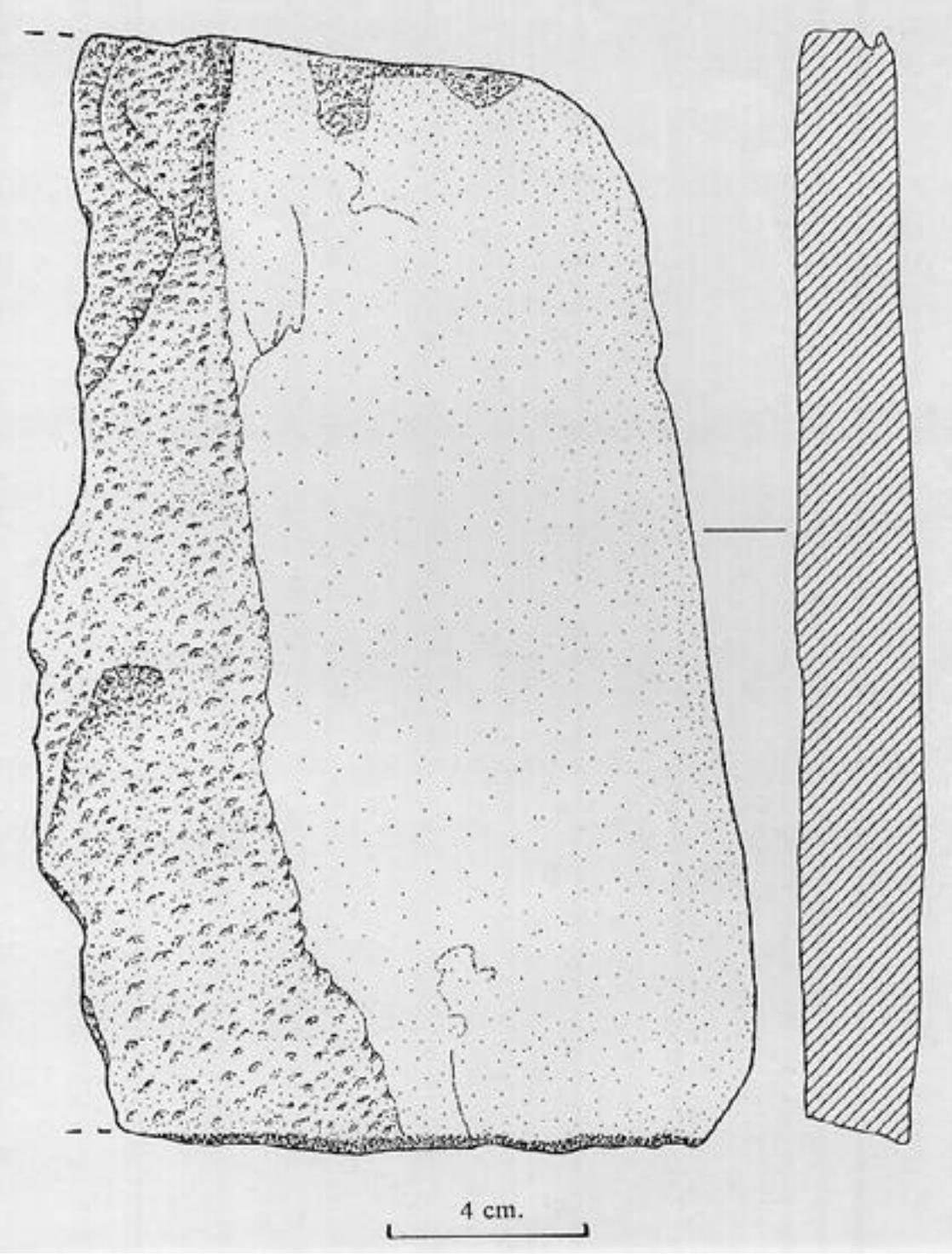


Fig. 5. Slab sandstone metate fragment (2-031) that covered the cache, CA-KER-2720.

Charmstones

Three imperforate, plummet-shaped charmstones were found under the metate. Each of the specimens appears to be essentially complete, and all exhibit wear and/or “damage,” evidence of having been used. The first specimen (2-043; Fig. 6*a*) was made from a soft, white-banded limestone from an unknown source. It is shaped exactly like a plum-bob, with the distal end being broken. A series of small grooves was cut along the base of the small knob at the proximal end, presumably to aid in the attachment of a cord. The specimen is completely covered with red pigment (possibly hematite or cinnabar).

The second example (2-045; Fig. 6*b*) is plummet-shaped and was made from sandstone. One end tapers to a point while the other recurves into a bulbous “head.” This head appears to have been modified to resemble a phallus. Red pigment is evident on the entire specimen, although in lesser quantities than the specimen described above.

The third specimen (2-046; Fig. 6*c*) is plummet-shaped and was made from a tan-colored granitic stone. The upper (widest) end of the artifact, which recurves from the maximum width of the artifact, contains a small concavity. Both ends have been battered, the smaller end showing evidence of straight-on battering, as if used as a hammerstone. Red pigment is present all across the piece, including in the flake scars at each end, indicating that it was applied after the battering.

Stone Beads

Two stone beads were discovered within the cache. The first (2-034; Fig. 7*a*) was made of a granitic stone and was uniconically drilled. No red pigment was noted. The other (2-035; Fig. 7*b*) was made from a granitic stone containing numerous small vesicles. It was biconically drilled and has red pigment on its surface.

Hammerstones

Two hammerstones (interpreted as whose primary function was to hammer other items) were recovered. One (2-037; Fig. 7*c*) is a spherical quartzite cobble, with battering along most of its edges. The second specimen (2-041; Fig. 7*d*) is a portion of a waterworn cobble. Several of the battered edges on this second hammerstone contain flake scars and smashed areas. Red pigment is evident on some surfaces of the second hammerstone.

Unshaped Stones

Six small, “unshaped,” waterworn stones were found in direct association with the cache. Four of the specimens are roughly spherical and appear unmodified. The fifth (2-040; Fig. 8*a*) is a portion of an elongated cobble and has numerous scratches (presumably of cultural origin) on its surface. The sixth (2-047; Fig. 8*b*) is roughly cylindrical in shape. Its smaller end is slightly battered. The geographic origin of the stones is not known. An additional “spherical” stone was found in the same level approximately one meter north of the cache.

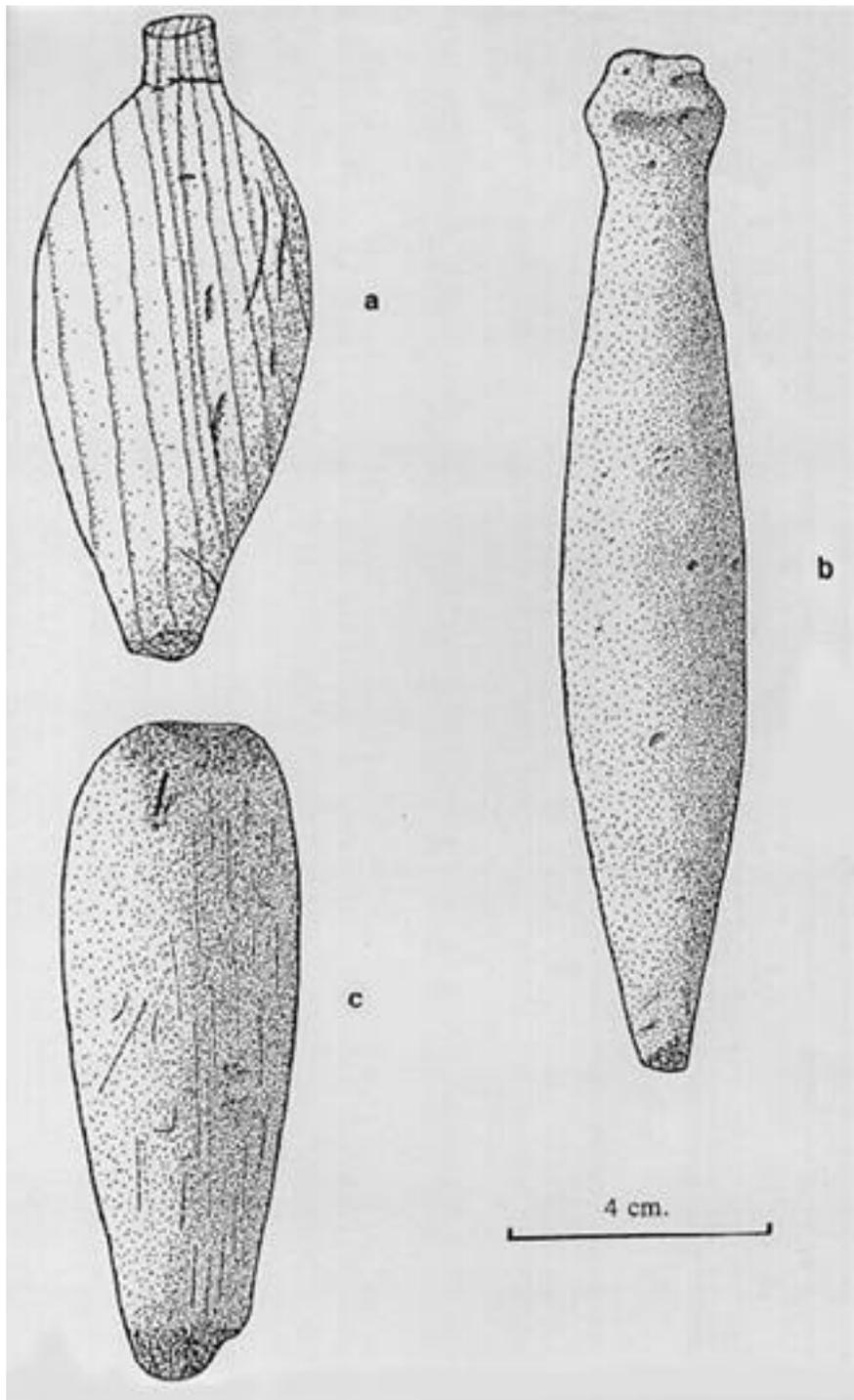


Fig. 6. Charmstones from the CA-KER-2720 cache: a 2-043; b 2-045; c 2-046.

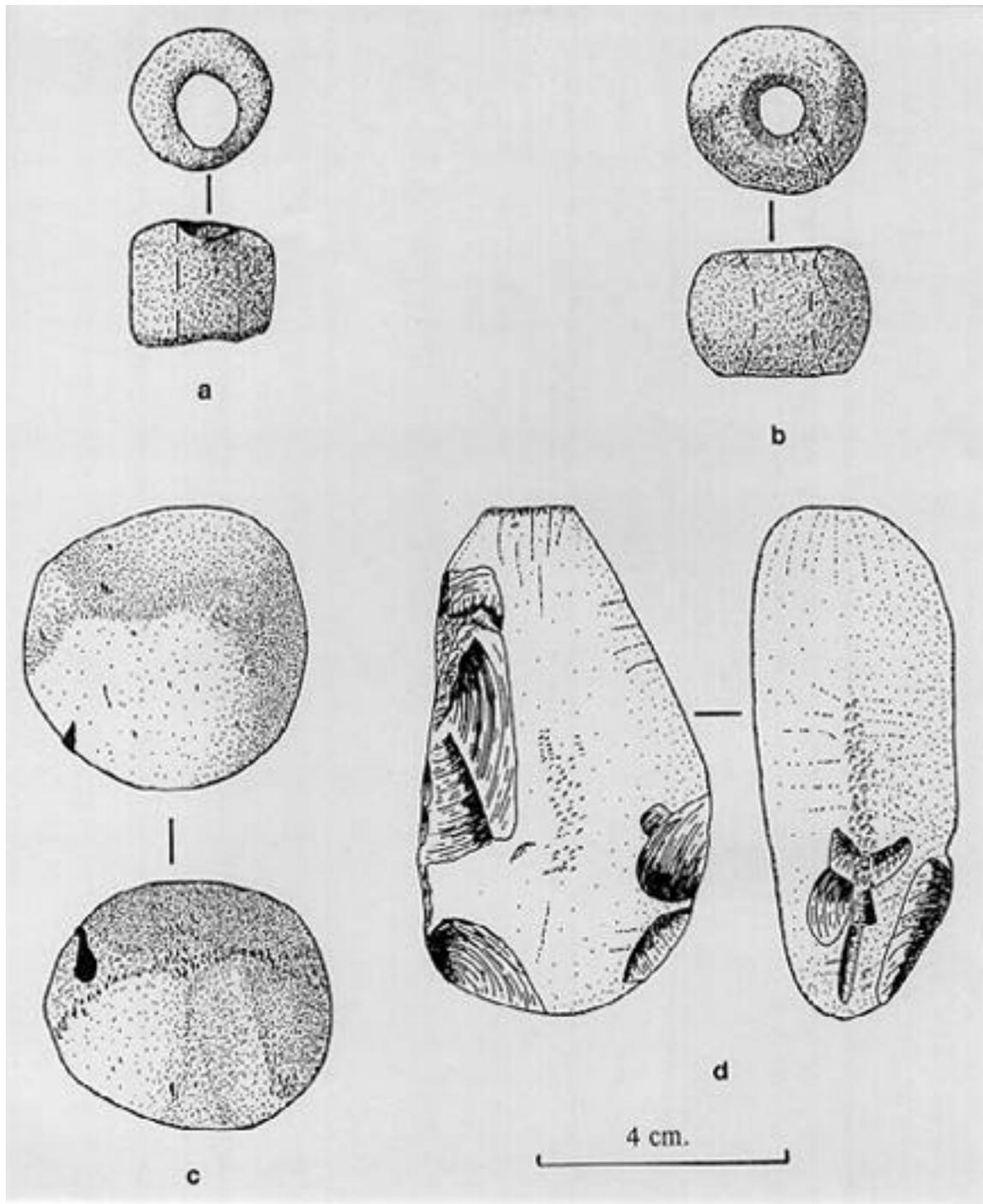


Fig. 7. Stone beads (a, b) and hammerstones (c, d) from the CA-KER-2720 cache: a 2-034; b 2-035; c 2-037; d 2-041.

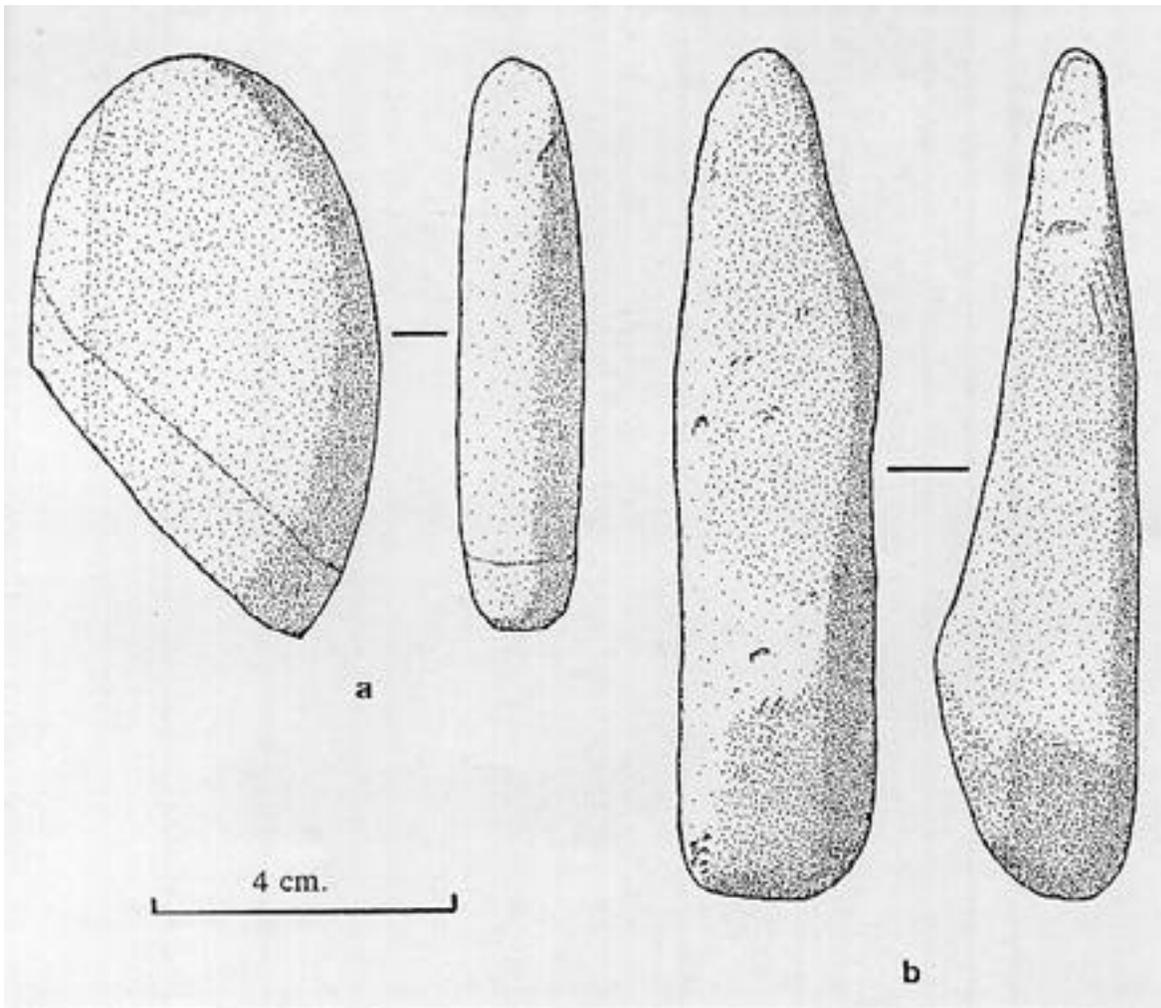


Fig. 8. Several unshaped stones from the CA-KER-2720 cache: a 2-040; b 2-047.

Debitage

Three small chert flakes were found in (presumed) association with the cache, although it is possible that their presence was incidental.

Shell

Three small fragments of mussel shell (*Anodonta* sp.) were discovered in association with the cache. However, as with thedebitage, it is not clear whether the presence of shell was intentional or incidental.

Soil Sample

A soil sample (Cat. No. 2-050) was taken from the feature directly below the artifacts. This sample has not yet been processed.

Discussion

Charmstones of various forms are widely known in the southern San Joaquin Valley (e.g., Gifford and Schenck 1926; Wedel 1941) and elsewhere in central California (Hewes 1941; Elsasser and Rhode 1996). Many caches of charmstones have been recorded (though largely unreported) by archaeologists from central California, some found in association with burials (e.g., Moratto 1984:203-204; Elsasser and Rhode 1996), and many other specimens have been collected by private individuals (e.g., Latta 1977:641-646; Seals 1993). This is the first reported charmstone cache from the southern San Joaquin Valley, to my knowledge, that was excavated under controlled archaeological conditions.

The dating of the cache is uncertain. Imperforate charmstones are characteristic of both the Middle and Late periods (Elsasser 1978:Fig. 5; Moratto 1984:183) and the shallow depth of the feature in the deposit suggests that it dates to the Late Period, perhaps even after the primary occupation of the site.

The function of charmstones is not at all clear. Various ideas have been advanced regarding use (see discussion in Elsasser and Rhode 1996:6-9): association with thunder and use in rain-making (Kroeber 1925:518; Gayton 1948:37; Latta 1977:640-641); to influence success in fishing and/or hunting (Latta 1931:3, 1977:646); for medical use (Gayton 1948:24); or as net weights (Barrett and Gifford 1933:Fig. 25). One final account is noteworthy.

The Indian medicine man used to collect twelve of maybe twenty charm stones and arrange them in the form of a circle, with another very different stone in the center, and over these he sprinkled the seed of the wild sage, feathers, and red ochre, when war, sickness, drought or famine came to the tribe. He would next thrust the stones violently together...[account by Gates, in Latta 1977:646].

Interpretations

The cache contained five “major” groundstone ornaments (three charmstones and two beads), all of which appear to be complete and perhaps even “used.” The other materials in the cache—hammerstones, metate, small spherical stones—represent manufacturing/processing

tools, a very different functional category from the ornaments. There are several possible interpretations for this material.

First, it may be that the feature assemblage may be a stone ornament manufacturing kit, complete with several finished items. While we do not understand the details, we do know that groundstone ornaments have to be shaped and polished, and that a tool kit is involved. Perhaps this is one such kit.

Second, the cache may represent a ritual event such as described in the ethnographic literature (see above). The pieces were not arranged in a circle nor was there any fire associated. Some such caches have been reported as being directly associated with burials, but such is not the case with the CA-KER-2720 feature (however, a flexed burial of an adult was discovered nearby). The presence of red pigment on each of the charmstones and several other artifacts may support the ritual hypothesis. Of course, the feature may be a ritual cache of a manufacturing kit.

A third possibility is that the cache represents some sort of “shaman’s kit” and that it once contained additional, perishable, materials. There may be other, more reasonable, hypotheses yet unexplored. Only additional data will help in the clarification of this problem.

Acknowledgements

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