

A Cetacean-Like Manuport from the Bonita Mesa Site (CA-ORA-106/219)

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Abstract

This article focuses on a siltstone manuport whose cetacean-like shape likely prompted its retrieval by a Native person. Its historic retrieval occurred over four decades ago when PCAS members walked the Bonita Mesa site (CA-ORA-106/219). Just this year the unusual object reemerged among collections held at the PCAS Curation Facility. The manuport is described and discussed, and notes are provided on the Bonita Mesa site.

Introduction

A recent *Quarterly* article (Koerper and Desautels-Wiley 2012) illustrated and discussed a selection of whole-body cetacean effigies, as well as objects whose morphologies offer mimics of a body part, the dorsal fin. The varied specimens were recovered in Chumash and Tongva (Gabrielino) territories. The referent of many if not most of the purported fin symbols was more likely the sea mammal appendage rather than the fish part. The article advocated that a new genre, the “dorsal fin effigy,” be inducted into the “portable cosmos” of south central coastal California (see e.g., Lee 1981).

Added support for this proposal followed soon after with rediscovery of a fin-shaped carving, long sequestered among PCAS Curation Facility holdings, and timely discussion of this artifact in the subsequent *Quarterly* issue (Koerper 2012). This specimen reemerged during a “curation day” get-together. Volunteers familiar with the Koerper and Desautels-Wiley study (2012) occasioned the immediate set-aside of

this object which was collected at or near CA-ORA-134 on Bonita Mesa (Figure 1).¹

Another consequence of volunteers’ familiarity with the Koerper and Desautels-Wiley publication occurred during yet another curation workday. As PCAS members were organizing, rebagging, relabeling, and cataloging several collections, an unusual siltstone cetacean-shaped item turned up (Figures 2 and 3), but having a whole-body rather than a body part look, and it was a manuport rather than an artifact. Herein, the unique piece is described, and some information is provided regarding its provenance, the Bonita Mesa site.

When the siltstone manuport was rediscovered, it was with a number of other objects likewise attributed to CA-ORA-219. (ORA-219 and CA-ORA-106 are best regarded as one site, as indicated in the title of our article.) Close by the Bonita site, or ORA-106/219, is ORA-134. Other well-known sites just to the north and near Bonita Reservoir were CA-ORA-107 and CA-ORA-125 (Figure 1).^{2,3}

The Bonita Mesa Site Manuport

The material of the object shown in Figures 2 and 3 is a dense siltstone. The specimen weighs 203 g. It is 101 mm long, 35 mm wide, and 54 mm high. Its color is light tan, save for those surface areas exhibiting thin areas of caliche (calcium carbonate). The caliche ranges in color from dark to moderate gray.

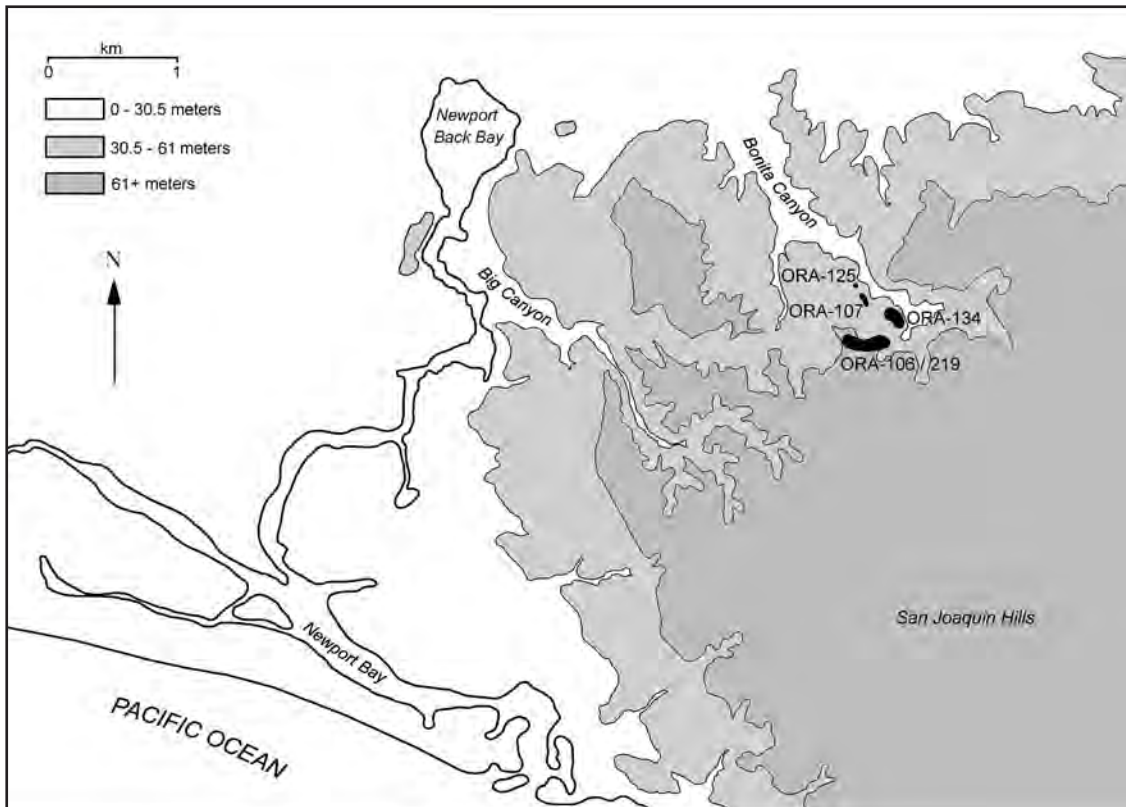


Figure 1. Site location map. After map showing western extension of the San Joaquin Hills, Newport Back Bay, and Newport Bay circa 1890 (in Chace et al. 1967).

The specimen is a concretion. The actions of wind and/or water may account for surface smoothness. All surface areas are devoid of striations that might indicate purposeful shaping. Thus, archaeological status is that of “manuport,” not “artifact.”

It is hard to imagine that the Native person who discovered the object, and others who saw it, would have missed a likeness to at least some members of Cetacea. It is also reasonable to suppose that if people were familiar with carved representations of cetaceans connecting with the culture’s sacred and/or aesthetic landscapes, there would have followed favorable comparisons with those effigies. The prominent projection atop the piece (Figures 2 and 3) offers the immediate look of a dorsal fin. This gently curving “appendage” reduces in width and thickness from its base to its apex.

At the front end of the “body,” the “head” is rounded along its forward edges which encircle a slight depression (see Figure 3). The bluntness of the “head” recalls the head of some regional toothed whales (includes dolphins and porpoises) that lack prominent beaks, specifically the sperm whale (Family *Physeteridae*) and three members of the dolphin family (*Delphinidae*)—short-finned pilot whale, pygmy killer whale, and Risso’s dolphin (see Carwardine 2002). Thus, the manuport’s “head” was probably given less consideration than the “fin” in recommending the object for retrieval and transport to some camp or village.

The three kinds of dolphins just noted have prominent dorsal fins as do various other regional dolphins, porpoises, and whales. The sperm whale has a small triangular or rounded hump, not a dorsal fin.

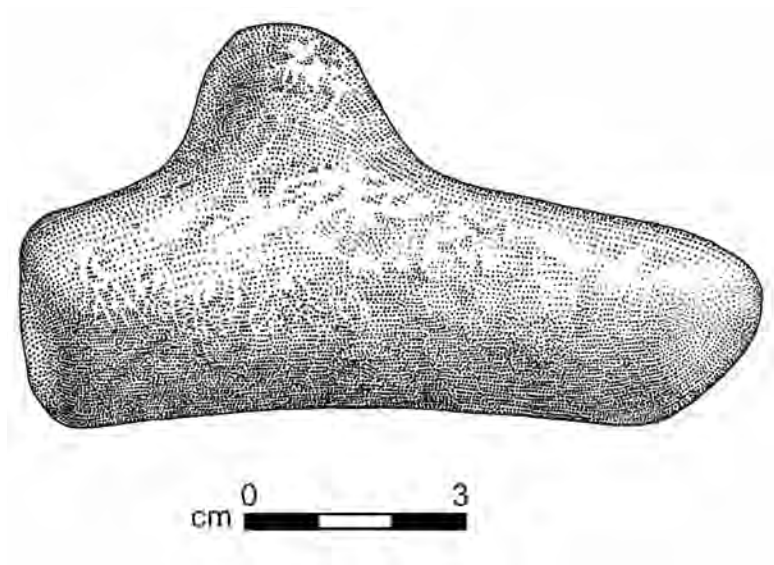


Figure 2. Profile view of cetacean-like manuport found at CA-ORA-106/219.



Figure 3. Oblique view of cetacean-like manuport retrieved from CA-ORA-106/219.

Location

The Bonita Mesa site (ORA-106/219) sits on a knoll southwest of the Bonita Reservoir. Hal Eberhart with others recorded the site in 1950, giving it the -106 number (see Peterson 2000:6-7). PCAS members Hafner, Bakker, and McKinney turned in a site survey record in 1966 under the ORA-219 designation. The cetacean-like manuport and many other artifacts (see

Figures 4 and 5) stored at the PCAS facility in boxes with ORA-219 labels may have resulted from surface collecting at the time of the 1966 survey.

Then again, the artifacts and the manuport were perhaps picked up in 1968, around the time a corner of the site was impacted by development on the northern part of the Harbor View Hills subdivision. It is also possible that the collection was made sometime

after June 1970 when it was reported that “ORA-219” was “bulldozed out of existence” (Anonymous 1970:4; see also Mitchell and McKinney 1979). Up to that time the PCAS planned to excavate the site since the midden appeared to be concentrated and deep. Another incentive to excavate may have been that because “ORA-219” was taken by some to be an extension of

ORA-106, Winterbourne’s “Pinnacles site,” (a.k.a. the Bonita Mesa site and the Bonita Mesa Rancheria site by WPA crews) (see Winterbourne 1938a, 1969), PCAS investigations there may have been seen as potentially a test of the competence of WPA archeology. After all, the Society had undertaken investigations at ORA-107 in part to gauge WPA competence.



Figure 4. Vesicular basalt lozenge-shaped artifact from CA-ORA-106/219.



Figure 5. Vesicular basalt abrading stone from CA-ORA-106/219.

Mitchell and McKinney (1979) noted the nearness of ORA-106 and ORA-219 and eventually regarded the sites as part of a “complex” they labeled “Bonita Mesa.” They also noted the closeness to what they called CA-ORA-124 and so placed this site in the Bonita Mesa complex. ORA-124 is better known as ORA-134.

As it turned out, reports of the demise of “ORA-219” had been greatly exaggerated. Belying the “bulldozed out of existence” statement, an updated (1981) site survey by Ron Douglas and E. Gardner noted a 4000 m² midden remaining where pothunters carried on their depredations. These recorders supposed ORA-219 and ORA-106 to be a single large site.

Among the PCAS holdings of “-219” labeled artifacts are specimens that indicate occupation after the Late Prehistoric period. They include two large adobe bricks, one of which exhibits some asphaltum. Other historic component items include three horseshoes and a cleaver-cut bone that appears to be from a large domesticated animal.

Of very special note are two artifacts fashioned out of vesicular basalt. One is lozenge-shaped with a lenticular/ovoid cross-section, and it is absent any hint of use wear (Figure 4). It was shaped only by pecking. It is almost certainly a magico-religious object (see Koerper and Desautels-Wiley 2010). Caliche adheres to some surfaces. We suppose the artifact’s manufacture dates many centuries before the Late Prehistoric period, but without good provenience, it would be folly to posit that a component of comparatively great antiquity occurred at the Bonita Mesa site.

This lozenge stone is 181 mm long, 72 mm wide, and 60 mm in height. It weighs 884 g. A pleasing symmetry might appear should the mind’s eye smooth over the pocked surfaces.

The other vesicular basalt artifact (Figure 5) weighs 1333 g. It is 116 mm long, 105 mm wide, and 66 mm thick. It is broken at one end. The surface of the opposite end is the smoothest, indicating the greatest level of grinding action. The two side panels appear shaped only by pecking, while the larger upper and lower surfaces took shape through pecking and grinding. Thus there are three ground surfaces, but they are of varying smoothness. Perhaps this was a kind of sanding block for woodworking, each abrading surface with its own grade of coarseness. Small patches of caliche are seen here and there.

The WPA study of ORA-106 yielded some artifacts attributable to the Late Prehistoric period, but most artifacts seemed not particularly time sensitive. Cottrell et al. (1979) reported on test level investigations at ORA-106, calling the site an early Late Prehistoric village.

Subsequent investigations at the Bonita Mesa site are summarized in Peterson (2000:7). The 1993 test program (Mason et al. 1993) involved surface collection and posthole sampling to draw site boundaries and also excavation of 13 2x2 m units. The site was labeled a major residential base that was occupied in the late Intermediate period and at the beginning of the Late Prehistoric period (Mason et al. 1993:36-40). Especially noted were: (1) shellfish remains indicating exploitation of both Newport Bay and the open coast and (2) Winterbourne’s observation of a nearby spring.

The mitigation effort three years later (Mason et al. 1996) was extensive. There were 104 2 x 2 m units dug to sterile. Some units descended to 100 cm, but the average depth was 50 cm. Nine features were exposed. Artifacts covered all functional categories, reaffirming that the site was a major residential base. The artifacts and radiocarbon determinations further supported late Intermediate and Late Prehistoric occupations. The varied data fed a redefinition of the Intermediate period (see Peterson 2000:347-391, 526-545).

Final Thoughts

The manuport featured herein has been described, adding one more specimen to an extended list of cetacean-themed objects (see e.g., Koerper and Desautels-Wiley 2012) and further piquing curiosity about regional peoples' relationships, material and spiritual, to these marine animals. The temporal run of the manuport's cultural life is unknowable. Neither is it possible to know whether its ownership was limited to persons living at Bonita Mesa.

Beyond the probably basic referent (cetacean), any further take on symbology would fall to mere speculation. Was it collected and kept as just an oddity/curiosity—a “keeper,” or “pocket rock?” Perhaps it was picked up with the intent of using it as a charm/amulet or of applying it to more formal magico-religious practices. Was it looked upon as the functional equivalent of certain kinds of carved effigies? Maybe it was gifted to a child as a toy, if its finder was not a child in the first place.

Acknowledgments

The authors appreciate receiving permission from the Pacific Coast Archaeological Society to write about the three artifacts found at CA-ORA-106/219 and stored at the PCAS Curation Facility. It was Bob Brace who first recognized the unique look of the cetacean-like manuport. Personnel with the South Central Coastal Information Center, CSUF, were very helpful. Karen Koerper typed the drafts of our paper, and Rene Brace, Quarterly Production Editor, formatted the article. We also thank Dr. Matthew Boxt and the anonymous reviewers for their efforts.

End Notes

1. CA-ORA-134 (a.k.a. CA-ORA-124, Bonita Mesa IV, and Bonita Dam site) was investigated following the Bonita Mesa Survey undertaken in 1965. The

PCAS and Boy Scout Explorer Post #806 were granted permission by Donald Rimpau of The Irvine Company to excavate there (Schroth 1979:49). (Rimpau's title was Superintendent of Agricultural Services.) The investigations were soon written up (Smith 1965; Chace et al. 1967). A report on the faunal remains followed (see Chace 1969a).

2. CA-ORA-107 (a.k.a. Bonita site, Bonita Sheep Corral site, Bonita Sheep Camp, and Irvine #30) was first excavated in 1938 by WPA crewmen (Winterbourne 1969) who uncovered numerous burials. The PCAS redig of ORA-107 (Mead 1969; see also McKinney 1969; Chace 1969b) was stated to offer a test of the scientific competence of the government field program. WPA efforts were found wanting, referred to charitably as “casual.”

3. The PCAS and Boy Scout Archaeological Explorer Post #806 were granted permission by Donald Rimpau of The Irvine Company to excavate CA-ORA-125 (a.k.a. Bonita Cave site, Bonita Canyon Cave site, and Bonita Mesa Cave site). Chace (1969a:69-70) reported on the faunal remains of this small rock shelter, located just above and northwest of Bonita Reservoir. The site had been tested in 1965 under the direction of Duane Hafner (see Hafner 1970:2; Anonymous 1971:2; Scharping 1971:3; Anonymous 1972a:2; Anonymous 1972b).

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